



An Action Research Approach to Developing a Recognition of Prior Learning Framework for Postgraduate Studies in Emergency Medicine

Debbie Jane Groome

Student number: NTTDEB002

Thesis presented for the degree of

DOCTOR IN PHILOSOPHY (PhD)

In

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town

Supervisor: Dr Charmaine Cunningham

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

DECLARATION

I, Debbie Jane Groome, hereby declare that the work on which this thesis is based is my original work (except where acknowledgements indicate otherwise) and that neither the whole work nor any part of it has been, is being, or is to be submitted for another degree in this or any other university. I authorise the university to reproduce for the purpose of research either the whole or any portion of the contents in any manner whatsoever. I further declare the following:

- I know that plagiarism is a serious form of academic dishonesty.
- I have read the document about avoiding plagiarism, am familiar with its contents, and have avoided all forms of plagiarism mentioned there.
- Where I have used the words of others, I have indicated this by the use of quotation marks.
- I have referenced all quotations and properly acknowledged other ideas borrowed from others.
- I have not and shall not allow others to plagiarise my work.
- I declare that this is my own work.

Signature:

Signed by candidate

Date:

10 February 2025

APPROVAL FOR THE INCLUSION OF PUBLICATIONS IN THIS PHD THESIS

I confirm that I have been granted permission by the University of Cape Town's Doctoral Degrees Board to include the following publication(s) in my PhD thesis, and where co-authorships are involved, my co-authors have agreed that I may include the publication(s):

It must be noted that during the journey of my thesis, I changed my surname from Winstanley to Groome.

1. Winstanley, D. & Cunningham, C. 2023. A Descriptive Literature Review of Recognition of Prior Learning for Vocational Learners in Emergency Medical Care in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 37(4):322-33. <https://doi.org/10.20853/37-4-5313>.
2. Groome, D. & Cunningham, C. 2024. From vocational to graduation: A mixed methods study of support needs for vocational learners pursuing post-graduate education in South Africa. *African Journal of Emergency Medicine*, 14(4):263–7. Available from: <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S2211419X24000375>
3. In review with BMC Medical Education: Groome D, Cunningham C. Support Needs for Vocational Learners Transitioning into Postgraduate Education: A Thematic Analysis
4. In review with The Journal Of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa: Groome D, Cunningham C. Participatory Action Research in Emergency Care Education: an Indirect Approach to Learner Support.

Signature:

Date: 10 February 2025

Student Name: Debbie Groome

Student Number: NTTDEB002

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help, guidance, and support of many. I am grateful to:

- My supervisor, Dr Charmaine Cunningham, your mentorship extended beyond academics – you taught me that “owning your story is the bravest thing you can do” (Brené Brown). Your inspiration, belief, and steadfast support have been invaluable throughout this journey.
- The Division of Emergency Medicine at UCT, for your encouragement and the resources you provided. It created the foundation for this research.
- All the participants of this study: the PGDip EC cohorts of 2021, 2022, and 2023, as well as their tutors. Your shared stories and experiences have been central to the insights and outcomes of this work.
- My husband, Sean, your unwavering support was my bridge throughout this journey. From the games of golf that gave me the space to work, to your endless encouragement and belief in me, I couldn’t have done this without you.
- My son Bryce, who lives by the belief that the power of one is above all things – the power to believe in yourself, and who proves time and again that “little beats big when little is smart”. We did this! Absoloodle! (Inspired by The Power of One, Bryce Courtenay).
- I would like to extend my gratitude to the mentors and those who have shaped my path in emergency medicine—your passion and dedication have ignited my drive for this research, inspiring me to explore, question, and contribute to the field with purpose and commitment.
- The EMS industry; never lose sight of the value of education.

ABSTRACT

Introduction

Vocational learning has been key to developing South Africa's emergency medical services (EMS) workforce. However, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) introduced in 1995 replaced vocational learning systems with standardised qualifications. While the framework supports recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a pathway to access higher education, its primary focus remains on undergraduate programmes. This creates potential challenges for vocational paramedics transitioning to postgraduate studies. Addressing systemic barriers and fostering equitable access for these learners is critical to promoting diversity and inclusion within academic and professional domains.

This research adopted a social constructivist approach embedded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), with an indirect participatory action research (PAR) methodology. The study examined the support needs of vocational paramedics, admitted to postgraduate study at the University of Cape Town (UCT) through the RPL process, during their year of study.

Methods

The research aim was addressed via four studies, each building on the other. Study one was a descriptive literature review, and study two entailed sequential mixed methodology research that included the quantitative analysis of learning styles and academic performance. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture the lived experiences of RPL candidates. The results were used to design study three, which included three participatory action cycles, culminating in study four, the development of a contextual support framework.

The research was conducted between 2021 and 2023, with ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Student Affairs at the UCT.

Results

The RPL process validated the knowledge and skills vocational paramedics had gained through work and life experiences. The results indicated that RPL candidates demonstrated academic performance comparable to those admitted through traditional pathways. However, the findings suggested that their vocational learning background did not adequately prepare them for the institutional and technological aspects of postgraduate study.

Personal motivation and peer and familial support emerged as enablers, while institutional culture and technological challenges were identified as barriers during the thematic analysis. The first action cycle introduced a tutor support programme available to all learners, providing additional support. This informed the second action cycle, which implemented a Tutor Student Charter to establish clear expectations and boundaries. The final action cycle focused on examining learners' engagement with university resources. The findings of the three studies contributed to the development of a support framework designed to bridge the gap between vocational learning and academic expectations.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was achieved. Four interconnected studies demonstrated that while RPL candidates exhibited strong academic potential, they faced challenges navigating academic and institutional environments. By exploring vocational paramedics' experiences transitioning into postgraduate programmes, the research highlights RPL's transformative role in promoting equitable and inclusive access to higher education.

Through the development of the Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework, the study offers a conceptual model designed to bridge the gap between vocational learning and academic demands. Contributing to the broader discourse on vocational learning and adult education, this research positions RPL as a mechanism for advancing educational equity. However, the findings emphasise that successful transitions require more than institutional access; they demand systemic strategies that integrate learner-centred support and foster collaborative practice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	I
APPROVAL FOR THE INCLUSION OF PUBLICATIONS IN THIS PHD THESIS.....	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	III
ABSTRACT.....	IV
Introduction	iv
Methods.....	iv
Results	v
Conclusion	v
KEY TERMS USED.....	XX
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	XXVI

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER 1: Introduction and Background	2
1.1 Vocational Learning	2
1.2 Recognition of Prior Learning.....	3
1.3 Problem Statement.....	6
1.4 Thesis Aim	7
1.5 Objectives	7
1.6 Research Design	7
1.7 Approach and Paradigm.....	9
1.8 Structure of this Research.....	9
1.9 Included Papers and Approvals	10
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review - Emergency Care.....	11
2.1 The Evolution of Emergency Care and Education in South Africa.....	11
2.1.1 The Basic Ambulance Assistant (BAA) Course.....	12
2.1.2 The Ambulance Emergency Assistant (AEA) Course.....	12
2.1.3 The Critical Care Assistant (CCA) Course	12
2.2 Advances from Vocational to NQF Qualifications.....	13
2.3 Current Pathways in Emergency Care.....	14
2.3.1 Higher Certificate in Emergency Medical Care	16

2.3.2	Diploma in Emergency Medical Care	16
2.3.3	Bachelor's Degree in Emergency Medical Care	17
2.4	RPL	17
2.5	Implementation of RPL	19
2.6	Challenges in Entering Higher Education using RPL pathways	20
2.6.1	Mismatch between vocational and higher education learning approaches.....	21
2.6.2	The cultural and institutional adjustment	21
2.6.3	Balancing multiple responsibilities	21
2.7	Workforce Shortages and the Need for EMS Education	22
2.8	RPL for Vocational Paramedics	23
2.9	UCT Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care	23
2.9.1	Programme design	24
2.9.2	Admission to the PGDip EC through RPL for Access	27
2.10	Support Structures in Higher Education	28
2.11	Support Structures at UCT	29
2.11.1	Postgraduate and postdoctoral resources	30
2.11.2	Undergraduate resources.....	31
2.11.3	Online resource access	31
CHAPTER 3: A Targeted Review of Educational Theories		33
3.1	Introduction	33
3.2	Justification for the Use of SCT.....	35
3.3	The Zones of Development	36
3.4	Scaffolding	37
3.5	Vygotsky's Theory and Adult Learning	39
3.6	Lens: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Scaffolding.....	40
CHAPTER 4: A Descriptive Literature Review of Recognition of Prior Learning for Vocational Learners in Emergency Medical Care in South Africa		42
4.1	Abstract	43
4.2	Background.....	44
4.3	RPL in South Africa	45
4.4	Educational Opportunities for Vocational Emergency Care Providers	46

4.5	Design and Methods.....	47
4.5.1	Study design.....	47
4.5.2	Search strategy	47
4.5.3	Inclusions and exclusions	48
4.6	Results	48
4.6.1	Transition through recognition of prior learning.....	49
4.6.2	Individual enablers and barriers.....	50
4.6.3	Academic enablers and barriers	51
4.6.4	Institutional enablers and barriers.....	53
4.7	RPL Students' Transition.....	54
4.8	Conclusion	54
4.9	Discussion of Section 1	55

SECTION 2: MIXED METHODOLOGY STUDIES

CHAPTER 5: Research Design	59
5.1 Research Design	60
5.1.1 Study 1.....	61
5.1.2 Study 2.....	61
5.1.3 Study 3.....	62
5.1.4 Study 4.....	64
5.2 Timelines.....	65
5.3 Sample Size	65
CHAPTER 6: Ethical Concerns and Considerations.....	67
6.1 Vulnerable Population	67
6.2 Trustworthiness.....	68
6.2.1 Credibility	68
6.2.2 Transferability.....	69
6.2.3 Dependability.....	69
6.2.4 Confirmability.....	70
6.3 Bias	70
6.3.1 The researcher	70
6.3.2 Primary supervisor	71
6.4 Ethical Approval.....	72

6.5	Reflexive Journal	72
6.5.1	Researcher's reflexive journal extract	72
CHAPTER 7: Honey and Mumford Learning Styles.....		77
7.1	Introduction	77
7.2	Overview of Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles.....	78
7.3	Application and Use.....	78
7.4	Rationale for HMLSQ Use in this Study.....	80
7.5	Methods	81
7.5.1	Ethical concerns	81
7.5.2	Ethical approval.....	82
7.6	Validation of the Questionnaire	82
7.7	Data Analysis	83
7.8	Results	83
7.8.1	Overall cohort (RPL and Non-RPL) 2021 and 2022.....	85
7.8.2	85
7.8.3	RPL cohort.....	86
7.9	Discussion.....	86
7.10	The Reflector Learning Style and Vygotsky's Framework.....	88
CHAPTER 8: From Vocational to Graduation: A Mixed Methods Study of Support Needs for Vocational Learners Pursuing Postgraduate Education in South Africa ..		90
8.1	Abstract	91
8.1.1	Introduction.....	91
8.1.2	Methods	91
8.1.3	Results.....	91
8.1.4	Conclusion	91
8.2	Introduction	92
8.3	Recognition of Prior Learning.....	94
8.4	Educational Transformation	94
8.5	Problem Statement.....	95
8.6	Aims	95
8.7	Study Design.....	95
8.7.1	Trustworthiness	96

8.7.2	Ethical considerations	96
8.8	Data Collection.....	97
8.9	Results	98
8.10	Discussion	101
8.11	Limitations	103
8.12	Conclusion.....	103
8.13	Dissemination of results.....	104
8.14	Discussion	104

CHAPTER 9: Support Needs for Vocational Learners Transitioning into Postgraduate Education: A Thematic Analysis

9.1	Abstract	108
9.1.1	Background.....	108
9.1.2	Methods	108
9.1.3	Results.....	108
9.1.4	Conclusions	108
9.2	Introduction	109
9.3	Aim of the Research	111
9.4	Research Methods.....	111
9.4.1	Study setting.....	111
9.4.2	Population and sampling.....	111
9.4.3	Inclusion and exclusion criteria.....	111
9.5	Data Collection.....	112
9.6	Data Analysis	112
9.7	Ethical Considerations.....	113
9.7.1	Trustworthiness	113
9.8	Results	114
9.8.1	Theme 1: Individual.....	114
9.8.2	Theme 2: Academic	117
9.8.3	Theme three: Institutional.....	119
9.9	Discussion.....	120
9.10	Limitations	121
9.11	Conclusion.....	121
9.12	Discussion of Section 2.....	122

SECTION 3: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

CHAPTER 10: Participatory Action Research	127
10.1 Overview of Participatory Action Research.....	127
10.2 Theoretical Foundations of PAR.....	128
10.3 Craig Mertler and PAR.....	129
CHAPTER 11: Participatory Action Research in Emergency Care Education: an Indirect Approach to Learner Support.....	132
11.1 Abstract	133
11.1.1 Background.....	133
11.1.2 Methods	133
11.1.3 Results	133
11.1.4 Conclusion	133
11.1.5 Contribution.....	133
11.2 Introduction.....	134
11.3 Research Methods and Design	137
11.3.1 Study Design.....	137
11.3.2 Setting	138
11.3.3 Study Population and Sampling Strategy	138
11.4 Ethical Considerations	139
11.5 Results.....	139
11.5.1 Cycle 1: Establishing a tutor support group.....	140
11.5.2 Cycle 2: Establishing a charter for boundaries.....	142
11.5.3 Cycle 3: Exploring progression and lifelong learning	144
11.6 Synthesis across PAR cycles.....	145
11.7 Discussion	146
11.8 Strengths and Limitations	148
11.9 The Reflecting Stage	148
11.10 Implications and Recommendations	149
11.11 Limitations	149
11.12 Conclusion.....	149
11.13 Acknowledgements.....	150
CHAPTER 12: Participatory Action Research Cycle One – the Tutor Group	151

12.1	Background	151
12.2	Methods.....	151
12.3	Ethical Considerations	152
12.4	Ethical Concerns	152
12.4.1	Credibility	153
12.4.2	Dependability	153
12.4.3	Integrity	153
12.4.4	Accountability and reflexivity.....	153
12.5	The Planning Stage	153
12.6	The Acting Stage.....	154
12.7	The Developing Stage	155
12.7.1	The tutor orientation site.....	155
12.7.2	Allocation of learners to tutors.....	155
12.8	The Reflecting Stage	156

CHAPTER 13: Participatory Action Research Cycle Two – The Tutor Student

Charter	157	
13.1	Background	157
13.2	Methods.....	157
13.3	Ethical Considerations	158
13.4	Ethical Concerns	159
13.4.1	The group discussion	159
13.5	The Planning Stage	159
13.5.1	Overview of tutor group for 2022.....	160
13.5.2	Focus group discussion with the tutors.....	161
13.6	Content Analysis.....	162
13.7	Results of the Focus Group Discussion with the Tutors.....	162
13.8	Discussion	164
13.9	The Acting Stage.....	165
13.9.1	Designing a Tutor Student Charter	165
13.10	The Developing Phase.....	168
13.10.1	Implementation of the Tutor Student Charter	169
13.11	The Reflecting Stage	170
13.11.1	Tutor WhatsApp group and the safety cross	170

13.11.2	Tutor questionnaires	176
13.12	Discussion – WhatsApp Group, Safety Cross and Questionnaires	179
13.13	Report to Division of Emergency Care - Feedback from Tutor Interview – Report of Findings.....	181
13.13.1	Finding 1 - Introduction to postgraduate studies	182
13.13.2	Finding 2 – Setting of boundaries	182
13.13.3	Finding 3: Tutor assistance	183
13.14	Conclusion.....	184
CHAPTER 14: Participatory Action Research Cycle Three		185
14.1	Background	185
14.2	Methods.....	185
14.2.1	Ethical considerations.....	186
14.3	The Planning Stage	187
14.4	The Acting Stage.....	188
14.4.1	The 2022 PGDip EC graduate survey	190
14.4.2	The 2023 PGDip EC questionnaire.....	192
14.5	The Developing Stage	193
14.6	The Reflecting Stage	193
14.7	Executive Summary	194
14.7.1	Background of emergency medical care education in South Africa	195
14.7.2	PGDip EC RPL application and selection process	196
14.7.3	The research.....	197
14.8	Key Research Findings (Study 1 and 2)	197
14.8.1	Individual enablers and barriers	197
14.8.2	Academic enablers and barriers	198
14.8.3	Institutional enablers and barriers	199
14.8.4	Grades and academic performance.....	200
14.8.5	PAR cycles (Study 3).....	201
14.9	Summary of Research Findings	204
14.10	Recommendations	204
14.11	Conclusion.....	205

SECTION 4: THE BRIDGE-SCAFFOLD SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

CHAPTER 15: The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework	207
15.1 Introduction.....	207
15.2 Methodological Approach to the Framework Development.....	209
15.2 The Bridge-Scaffold: Supporting the Transition	211

SECTION 5: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 16: Discussion.....	216
16.1 Introduction.....	216
16.2 The Concept of Success.....	217
16.3 Individual Transition	218
16.3.1 Opportunities, access and support.....	219
16.4 Academic Transition	220
16.4.1 Honey and Mumford learning styles	220
16.4.2 Academic performance.....	221
16.5 Institutional Transition.....	222
16.6 Inclusion through PAR.....	224
16.7 The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework.....	225
CHAPTER 17: Limitations and Recommendations	226
17.1 Introduction.....	226
17.2 Contributions of This Study.....	226
17.2.1 Empirical contribution	226
17.2.2 Theoretical contribution	227
17.2.3 Methodological contribution.....	227
17.3 Limitations	228
17.4 Future Research Opportunities	229
17.5 Recommendations	230
17.5.1 Enhancing support systems for vocational learners.....	230
17.5.2 Implementing the Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework.....	230
17.5.3 Expanding the role of MKOs	231
17.5.4 Feedback from RPL processes.....	231

CHAPTER 18: Conclusion	232
18.1 Conclusion	232
REFERENCES	233

TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Vygotsky’s Zones of Development.....	37
Figure 2: A Conceptual Interpretation of Tools, Rules and Community	39
Figure 3: PRISMA flow diagram of database search and article screening ¹⁹⁹	48
Figure 4: Chronological Timeline of Studies Conducted in the Research	60
Figure 5: Infographic of Research Design	61
Figure 6: Chronological Overview of PAR Cycles and Associated Tasks.....	64
Figure 7: Triangulation Used Within this Research	69
Figure 8: HMLSQ Learning Styles of the 2021 and 2022 PGDip EC Cohorts	84
Figure 9: HMLSQ Learning Styles of the 2021 and 2022 PGDip EC Cohorts - Non-RPL	84
Figure 10: HMLSQ Learning Styles of the 2021 and 2022 PGDip EC Cohorts – RPL Candidates.....	85
Figure 11: Display of Research Design	96
Figure 12: Thematic Map of Themes and Codes	113
Figure 13: Stages and Steps in Action Research (Adapted from Mertler)	137
Figure 14: Action Plan for Cycle One	141
Figure 15: PAR Cycle Two Process.....	143
Figure 16: PAR Cycle One Process.....	152
Figure 17: PAR Cycle Two Process.....	158
Figure 18: Action Plan for Cycle Two	167
Figure 19: Safety Cross March 2023	171
Figure 20: Safety Cross April 2023	172
Figure 21: Safety Cross May 2023	173
Figure 22: Action Plan for Cycle Three.....	189
Figure 23: The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework.....	211

TABLE OF TABLES

Table 1: The Four Studies of This Research.....	7
Table 2: Past and Current EMS Qualifications in Emergency Care in South Africa – Vocational and Undergraduate Qualification	15
Table 3: Overview of PGDip EC Courses.....	24
Table 4: Support Services at UCT	29
Table 5: National Qualification Framework Scale with Current Emergency Medical Care Qualifications	44
Table 6: Themes and Subthemes Influencing Postgraduate RPL Students’ Successful Transition	50
Table 7: Applications and Admissions to the PGDip EC (2021-2023).....	66
Table 8: Inclusion, Sample Size and Participants per Study	66
Table 9: 2021 and 2022 PGDip EC Learners who Participated in the HMLSQ	81
Table 10: Grade Averages	99
Table 11: Themes and Codes Identified in Thematic Analysis of Interviews	99
Table 12: Average results of RPL and non-RPL candidates across PGDip EC courses, 2021 and 2022.....	105
Table 13: Themes and Categories.....	114
Table 14: SMART Objective for PAR Cycle One	154
Table 15: SMART Objective for PAR Cycle two.....	160
Table 16: Codes and Themes from the Group Discussion	163
Table 17: Summary of the Tutor Student Charter	169
Table 18: Correlation of Communication Spikes and Assessment Dates	174
Table 19: Summary of PAR Cycle Two Questionnaires	177
Table 20: Summary of PAR 3 Questionnaires.....	186
Table 21: SMART Objective for PAR Cycle Three.....	187
Table 22: Questionnaire Responses	190
Table 23: Responses from PGDip EC 2022 Graduates.....	190
Table 24: Qualifications and NQF Levels of New Enrolment of 2022 PGDip EC Graduates	191
Table 25: Responses of Those Who Plan to Study Within the Next Two Years.....	191
Table 26: Choices of Support for RPL and Non-RPL Learners	192
Table 27: Grade comparison of the 2021 and 2022 cohorts.....	201

Table 28: Recommendations for the Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework..... 212

LIST OF APPENDICIES

Appendix 1: Ethical Approval Study 1.....	250
Appendix 2: Ethical Approval and Renewal for Study 2.....	251
Appendix 3: Ethical Approval and Renewal for Study 3.....	253
Appendix 4: Department of Student Affairs Approval.....	255
Appendix 5: Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire with Summary	256
Appendix 6: RPL Candidate Interview 2022.....	261
Appendix 7: Tutor Charter Questionnaire 1 March 2023	264
Appendix 8: Tutor Charter Questionnaire 2 April 2023	266
Appendix 9: Tutor Charter Questionnaire 3 May 2023.....	269
Appendix 10: Open Discussion Guide Tutors 2023	272
Appendix 11: Student Feedback Questionnaire 2023.....	273
Appendix 12: Graduate Feedback Questionnaire 2022.....	280
Appendix 13: Tutor Student Charter	282
Appendix 14: Turnitin Receipt.....	284
Appendix 15: Editing Certificate.....	285

KEY TERMS USED

Barrier

This term describes factors that hinder transitions into higher education.¹

Constructivist Principles

This learning theory posits that knowledge is actively constructed through experience and reflection, aligning with Vygotsky's SCT. It is essential in designing effective academic scaffolding.²

Emergency Care Provider

This refers to personnel who are registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) under the auspices of the Professional Board for Emergency Care.^{3,4}

Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

Any private or state organisation that is dedicated, staffed and equipped to offer: a) prehospital medical treatment and transport for the ill and/or injured, and where appropriate, b) inter-health establishment referrals of patients requiring medical treatment en-route, c) prehospital EMS for events, and d) the medical rescue of patients from a medical rescue situation.³

Enabler

This term describes factors that facilitate transitions into higher education.⁴

Framework

A framework is a structured foundation used in research to define, organise, and interpret key elements of the study. It provides a systematic approach to addressing the research problem, guiding data collection, and ensuring coherence in analyses and interpretations.⁵

Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA)

The HPCSA, established by the Health Professions Act (No. 56 of 1974), governs registered healthcare professions in South Africa. The HPCSA ensures public safety and guides professional standards by overseeing healthcare professionals' registration, education, training, professional conduct, ethical behaviour, continuing professional development, and compliance with healthcare standards. Registration with the HPCSA is mandatory for all individuals practising healthcare professions within its scope.⁶

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

These organisations offer learners advanced academic and professional training and typically award bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. HEIs can be public or private.⁷

Learner

An inclusive term referring to anyone learning, including pupils at school; students at colleges, traditional universities, comprehensives, and universities of technology; apprentices, learners in learnerships, interns; people undergoing training, and people learning non-formally and informally as well as people enrolled for particular qualifications or part time qualifications.⁸

Mentor

A mentor is an individual who provides sustained academic, professional, and psychosocial guidance to a less experienced learner, supporting their holistic development and adjustment to educational and institutional demands. Mentorship extends beyond subject-specific support to include role modelling, career advice, and personal encouragement, fostering confidence, critical thinking, and long-term growth.^{11,185}

National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

The NQF Act (No. 67 of 2008) underpins the NQF. This comprehensive system is approved by the Minister of Higher Education and Training for the classification, registration and publication of articulated and quality-assured national qualifications and part-qualifications. The South African NQF is a single integrated system

comprising three co-ordinated qualifications: Sub-Frameworks for General and Further Education and Training, Higher Education, and Trades and Occupations.⁸

Paramedic

Paramedics are prehospital emergency care personnel registered as such with the HPCSA Professional Board for Emergency Care (PBEC) engaged in an advanced life support scope of practice. This qualification includes the National Diploma in Emergency Medical Care, the Diploma in Emergency Medical Care and Critical Care Assistants.³

Postgraduate Education

Postgraduate education builds on undergraduate education, focusing on advanced mastery in specific disciplines, often integrating research and professional application.⁷

Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care (PGDip EC)

A PGDip EC is aligned with NQF Level 8. This qualification is offered by the UCT.⁹

Progression

Progression refers to the sustained movement and development of a learner after the initial transition into a programme. While transition relates to entry and early adaptation, progression reflects the learner's capacity to advance through the academic trajectory and, where applicable, to extend into further academic or professional opportunities. Internally, progression involves maintaining momentum toward successful completion of the programme; externally, it involves leveraging the qualification for continued study or career advancement.^{7,8,10,15}

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

In South Africa, RPL is a 'processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated, and assessed for the purposes of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development.'¹⁰

RPL Candidate

In the context of this research, an RPL candidate refers to a vocational paramedic who was admitted to the PGDip EC programme through RPL for access, as they did not hold the formal qualifications required for traditional application to the programme.

Scaffolding

Wood, Bruner and Ross define 'scaffolding' as an educational process in which learners receive tailored support to achieve goals, solve problems, or complete tasks that would otherwise be beyond their independent capabilities.¹¹

Short course

In this study, a short course refers to the vocational training programmes historically offered in South Africa for entry into the emergency medical services profession. These included the Basic Ambulance Assistant (BAA), Ambulance Emergency Assistant (AEA), and Critical Care Assistant (CCA) certificates. Short courses were typically of limited duration, skills-focused, and not aligned with the National Qualifications Framework, which meant they did not provide formal articulation into higher education pathways.^{3,4}

Social Being

Social being refers to the inherent interconnectedness of individuals, emphasising that learning and development are shaped by social interactions and cultural contexts, central to sociocultural frameworks.²

Sociocultural Theory (SCT)

The SCT is a psychological framework developed by Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, emphasising the critical role of culture and social interaction in shaping how people learn, think, and act. Also referred to as cultural-historical psychology, the SCT highlights the influence of tools, language, and shared experiences within a community on cognitive development.²

South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)

The statutory authority established in terms of the SAQA Act (Act 58 of 1995) and continuing in terms of the NQF Act (Act 67 of 2008), which oversees the further development and implementation of the NQF, the achievement of the objectives of the NQF, and the coordination of the three Sub-Framework.¹²

Success

In this study, success is understood as broader than academic excellence or final grades. It includes the learner's capacity to meet postgraduate expectations, engage meaningfully with course content, and complete the PGDip EC. This perspective aligns with literature on adult and non-traditional learners, which emphasises that success encompasses persistence, engagement, and integration into the academic environment rather than being confined to a narrow performance metric.^{7,8,10,15}

Tutor

A tutor is an academically capable peer or graduate, appointed by the institution, who provides structured, supplementary academic support to learners. Their role is narrower than that of a mentor, focusing on facilitating understanding of curriculum content, promoting academic skills, and easing the transition into university study, often within defined boundaries set by institutional policy.^{11,174,180,181}

Undergraduate Education

Undergraduate education refers to initial levels of tertiary learning, culminating in a first degree or diploma, and serves as the foundation for further academic or professional qualifications.⁷

Vocational Learner

In the context of this research, the vocational learner is any person who has acquired knowledge and skills primarily through occupationally directed training and workplace experience, often via qualifications or courses that are not aligned to the NQF. These individuals typically enter professional practice through short-course or sector-based training routes rather than conventional academic pathways.⁸

Vocational Learning

Vocational learning is education and training focused on developing specific skills and knowledge for a particular trade, profession, or occupation, combining theoretical instruction with practical application. It aims to prepare individuals for immediate integration into the workforce.¹³

Vocational Paramedic

Emergency care personnel registered with the HPCSA but without a prehospital qualification that aligns with the NQF of South Africa are vocational paramedics. This includes the Critical Care Assistant (CCA).

Vocational Training

Vocational training equips individuals with skills specific to particular trades or professions through practical and theoretical learning. It is designed to align with workforce needs, particularly in contexts like South Africa, where vocational education addresses employment challenges.¹³

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AEA	Ambulance Emergency Assistant (Qualification)
ANA	Ambulance Emergency Assistant (Registration Category)
ANT	Ambulance Noord Tegnikus (Paramedic) (Registration Category)
BAA	Basic Ambulance Assistant (Qualification)
CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CCA	Critical Care Assistant (Qualification)
CILT	Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching
ECA	Emergency Care Assistant (Registration Category)
ECP	Emergency Care Practitioner (Registration Category)
EMDRC	Emergency Medicine Divisional Research Committee
EMS	Emergency Medical Services
HEI	Higher Education Institutes
HMLSQ	Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire
HPCSA	Health Professional Council of South Africa
LMS	Learning Management System
MKO	More Knowledgeable Other
NECET	National Emergency Care Education and Training Policy
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PAR	Participatory Action Research
PBEC	Professional Board of Emergency Care
PGDip EC	Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SCT	Sociocultural Theory
UCT	University of Cape Town
ZAD	Zone of Actual Development
ZDD	Zone of Distal Development
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

SECTION 1

Introduction, Background and Literature Review

CHAPTER 1: Introduction and Background

1.1 Vocational Learning

In South Africa's evolving educational framework, vocational training is pivotal in driving economic growth and combating unemployment.¹ Vocational programmes provide learners with hands-on skills and industry-specific knowledge, enabling them to quickly integrate into the workforce and contribute to national development.¹ By aligning training with market demands, vocational education fosters a globally competitive workforce, equipping individuals to meet local and international employment standards.⁷

The dynamic nature of work, driven by technological advancements, evolving industry demands and the push for professionalisation, resulted in the need for better education and training.² This shift prompted the integration of programmes within higher education institutions (HEIs), moving beyond traditional vocational settings. In response, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was established in 1995, alongside the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), to create a cohesive system for developing, classifying, and recognising qualifications across education, training, and employment sectors.^{7,10} Designed to address challenges within South Africa's education and training system, the NQF provides clear pathways for learners, facilitating their progression and mobility across the education and training landscape.⁷ Learners who underwent vocational training and have not progressed to an NQF-aligned programme are referred to as '*vocational learners*' in this thesis.

Despite this framework advocating for vocational learners, vocational programmes' integration into HEIs has introduced challenges. Many vocational qualifications fail to align with SAQA and NQF standards, as illustrated in Table 2.^{4,7,12} This misalignment has created systemic challenges and perpetuated inequities, disproportionately affecting individuals from historically disadvantaged backgrounds who rely on vocational training.

In the context of this study, individuals' transition from vocational training to NQF-aligned education is evident in the emergency medical services (EMS).¹³ Historically rooted in vocational education, EMS training in South Africa focused on practical, skills-based short courses.¹³ The shift towards NQF-aligned qualifications and professionalisation led to the phasing out of previous vocational short courses and the creation of a new curriculum designed for NQF-aligned programmes, as illustrated in Table 2.^{4,7,13} This transition left many vocationally trained emergency care providers in a challenging position, as their qualifications do not align with the new NQF system. The phenomenon creates barriers to their progression and restricts their mobility within the evolving educational and professional framework.^{4,13}

The term '*paramedic*' refers specifically to prehospital emergency care providers in South Africa who were either trained through the vocational short-course system prior to the alignment with the NQF, or who obtained a National Diploma or Diploma in Emergency Care.^{3,4} In the context of this research, the term '*vocational paramedic*' refers to the paramedic who qualified through the vocational route. This is discussed further in Chapter 2. While the term '*Emergency Care Provider*' may, in regulatory and academic contexts, encompass a broader spectrum of practitioners, including those operating at various levels of care, this study focuses exclusively on the vocationally trained paramedic, whose qualifications predate the introduction of NQF-aligned programmes. These individuals represent a distinct professional cohort navigating the implications of systemic reform.

1.2 Recognition of Prior Learning

The South African National Policy for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was introduced to promote social inclusion, redress, and lifelong learning by enabling the recognition of skills and knowledge acquired through non-formal, informal, and experiential learning.¹⁰ One of its important applications is to provide vocationally trained individuals with access to higher education, while also contributing to the broader agenda of improving learner mobility and progression across the NQF.¹⁰ RPL is thus a process through which prior learning is formally recognised and can be used for access, credit, or career advancement. Post-apartheid, RPL has served as a mechanism for addressing historical inequities in

education and professional development by opening pathways to previously inaccessible qualifications. Rooted in principles of transformation, lifelong learning, and alignment with the NQF, RPL enhances equity and inclusivity within both education and the workplace.¹⁰ The RPL process is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

The South African vocational paramedics represent a cohort that may benefit from RPL. Despite their extensive practical experience, these professionals often lack the formal qualifications required to enter higher education without restarting their studies at the undergraduate level.^{4,13} However, while RPL provides a mechanism for accessing higher education, its application for vocational paramedics has been limited, constraining their educational and career development opportunities.¹⁰

The Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care (PGDip EC) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) offered a context for examining this issue.⁹ To the research team's knowledge, this programme is the first postgraduate qualification in emergency care in South Africa to integrate RPL as an admission pathway. The programme was not designed with vocational learners in mind, and the decision to include them via RPL was taken at a later stage. As a result, vocational paramedics were integrated into a mixed-classroom environment alongside medical practitioners, degree-qualified nurses, and degree-qualified paramedics.⁹ Given that this is the first postgraduate programme accessible to vocational paramedics, it was assumed that these learners might encounter challenges during their transition into postgraduate study and could require additional support to succeed. To differentiate between learners admitted to the PGDip EC through the traditional application process and those who entered via RPL for access, the term '*RPL candidate*' is used to refer to the latter throughout this research.

The researcher identified a gap in understanding how vocational learners experience the transition through postgraduate education and whether additional support structures are required to enable successful progression. To address this, the concepts of transition, success, and progression are explained in relation to this research.

Transition is identified in the National Education Policy as a key enabler of learner mobility.⁷ SAQA defines transition as movement across the NQF levels, supported by mechanisms such as RPL, Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT), and articulation across and within qualifications frameworks.^{7,10} In this research, '*transition*' refers to the way vocational learners, accessing postgraduate study via RPL, adapt to the academic, cognitive, and institutional demands of the PGDip EC within the broader university context. It encompasses both the structural process of entering postgraduate education and the experiential dimension of navigating an unfamiliar academic environment without the foundations typically acquired during undergraduate study. While transition is well established in educational literature, most research has focused on undergraduate pathways, leaving a limited understanding of vocational learners in postgraduate contexts.¹⁵⁻¹⁸

Progression, by contrast, is concerned with sustained movement and development after the initial transition has occurred. Where transition focuses on entry and early adaptation, progression reflects a learner's capacity to advance through the academic trajectory of the programme and, where relevant, into further academic or professional opportunities. Internally, this involves maintaining momentum towards successful completion; externally, it entails leveraging the qualification for continued study or career advancement.^{7,8,10,15}

In this study, success is understood as broader than academic excellence or final grades. It includes the learner's ability to meet postgraduate expectations, engage meaningfully with course content, and ultimately complete the PGDip EC. This perspective aligns with adult and non-traditional learner literature, which emphasises that success encompasses persistence, engagement, and integration into the academic environment rather than being confined to a narrow performance metric.^{7,16-18}

This study responds to the identified gap by asking three critical questions: Can vocational paramedics succeed in a postgraduate programme such as the PGDip EC? If so, what support is required to facilitate their success? Do they have distinct needs that differentiate them from traditionally admitted learners, and if so, what are these needs?

1.3 Problem Statement

The PGDip EC at the University of Cape Town was, to the knowledge of the research team, the first postgraduate programme in South Africa to admit vocationally trained paramedics through RPL. It was unknown whether these learners would be able to cope with the cognitive demands of postgraduate study, or what types of challenges they might encounter. The research commenced during the first year in which RPL was implemented for access to the PGDip EC, and as such no prior data were available on this programme or, more broadly, within emergency medical services education. Studying at postgraduate level presents cognitive and academic challenges, which may be intensified for learners whose prior education has been predominantly vocational in nature^{1,19,20}

The online mode of delivery adds further complexity, requiring digital literacy, self-regulation, and the ability to engage meaningfully in virtual learning environments without the reinforcement of face-to-face interaction.²⁰ Given the paucity of research exploring the support needs of those transitioning into postgraduate education in emergency medicine, this study set out to explore the experiences of vocational paramedics admitted through RPL. It aimed to identify the challenges they encountered, the support services they engaged with, and the barriers and enablers to their learning, as well as to consider processes that may enhance academic integration in the PGDip EC and beyond.

Their ability to successfully navigate the demands of the PGDip EC is therefore considered central to understanding their potential for success. By identifying and understanding the types of challenges experienced, additional support structures can be implemented, where necessary, to address needs, promote academic integration, and enable meaningful progression through the PGDip EC. This is essential for facilitating the advancement of vocational paramedics into higher academic and professional roles, thereby contributing to the sustainability, responsiveness, and ongoing development of the emergency care workforce in South Africa. The insights gained from this study may also hold relevance for other postgraduate programmes that admit learners through RPL, providing a basis for developing support models applicable beyond the immediate context of the PGDip EC.

1.4 Thesis Aim

This research aimed to develop a conceptual framework using a participatory action research (PAR) approach to support vocationally trained paramedics' transition into postgraduate studies in emergency medicine through RPL.

1.5 Objectives

The research aim was accomplished through the following objectives:

1. Describe the evidence base concerning RPL, outlining the support mechanisms RPL candidates require during postgraduate studies.
2. Examine RPL candidates' learning styles, perceptions and progress during their postgraduate studies.
3. Use a PAR approach to critique and evaluate RPL candidates' progression during postgraduate studies.
4. Develop a conceptual framework that addresses the support requirements of vocationally trained RPL candidates transitioning into higher education.

1.6 Research Design

To meet the objectives, the research comprised four studies:

Table 1: The Four Studies of This Research

Study 1	A descriptive literature review of RPL that considers RPL candidates' support needs during postgraduate studies (Chapter 4).
Study 2	A mixed-method study examines learning styles by conducting interviews to explore learners' perceptions and progress in the PGDip EC course, as well as analysing course evaluations and attrition rates (Chapters 7, 8 and 9).
Study 3	Use of PAR to critique and evaluate RPL candidates' progression through the PGDip EC programme (Chapters 10–14).
Study 4	Development of a conceptual framework of support for vocationally trained RPL learners transitioning into higher education (Chapter 15).

The first study situates the research within the broader context of emergency medical care education and the challenges RPL candidates experience during their transition into postgraduate education. This study, discussed in Chapter 4, describes the enablers and barriers encountered during this transition. It draws on existing literature highlighting the challenges that RPL candidates face in adapting to the academic expectations of postgraduate education.^{1,21-24}

Study 2 is divided into two stages to address the second research objective. The first stage examines learners enrolled in the PGDip EC programme's learning styles (Chapter 7). This stage builds on the literature suggesting that an understanding of individuals' unique learning styles can enhance their academic outcomes by enabling individuals to tailor their learning strategies and engage more effectively with course content.²⁵⁻²⁸

The second stage employs a two-phase sequential design. In the first phase, an exploratory mixed-methods approach is adopted, starting with a descriptive analysis of the 2021 PGDip EC cohort's grades (Chapter 8). This analysis identifies academic performance trends and patterns within the cohort. Thereafter, semi-structured interviews with RPL candidates were conducted to provide detailed insights into their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of the programme (Chapter 9).

Study 3 adopts a PAR approach involving three iterative action cycles (Chapters 10-14). Cycle one focuses on the tutor group for the PGDip EC programme to address support needs (Chapter 12). Cycle two includes group discussions and follows a centralised tutor WhatsApp group to develop a Tutor Student Charter to establish clear boundaries and expectations, reflecting principles of effective academic partnership (Chapter 13).²⁹ Cycle three evaluates the continuum of learning and progression, and the utilisation of institutional support structures (Chapter 14).

The findings from studies one, two, and three inform study four, which developed a conceptual framework of support for vocational paramedics transitioning to postgraduate studies (Chapter 15).

1.7 Approach and Paradigm

This research employed Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) as a foundational lens to explore the support needs of vocational paramedics transitioning into postgraduate education. The SCT, rooted in constructivist principles, emphasises the role of social interactions, cultural tools, and institutional structures in mediating learning and development. It provides a lens to understand the challenges and enablers vocational paramedics face during this transition.^{2,30,31}

1.8 Structure of this Research

This thesis consists of five sections, as detailed below.

Section 1: Introduction, Background and Literature Review (Chapters 1 to 4):

1. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study, outlining the research aims, objectives, and scope.
2. Chapter 2 presents the literature review, offering background on emergency medical care in South Africa and providing a context for the study.
3. Chapter 3 expands the literature review and introduces Vygotsky's SCT, the theoretical framework grounding this research.
4. Chapter 4 is a descriptive literature review focusing on the support needs of RPL candidates transitioning to postgraduate studies.

Section 2: Mixed Methodology Studies (Chapters 5 to 9):

1. Chapter 5 outlines the research design, providing an overview of the methodology.
2. Chapter 6 discusses the study's ethical considerations and concerns.
3. Chapter 7 details the researcher's use of the Honey and Mumford Learning Styles Questionnaire to identify learning preferences.
4. Chapter 8 examines the mixed-methods approach employed in the study.
5. Chapter 9 describes the reflexive thematic analysis process employed in analysing the semi-structured interviews.

Section 3: Participatory Action Research (Chapters 10 to 14):

1. Chapter 10 provides an overview of PAR, its principles, and its relevance to this study.
2. Chapter 11 describes the PAR methodology used.
3. Chapter 12 presents PAR cycle one.
4. Chapter 13 discusses PAR cycle two.
5. Chapter 14 focuses on PAR cycle three.

Section 4: The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework (Chapter 15):

1. Chapter 15 introduces the conceptual framework developed from the research findings, designed to address the support needs of RPL candidates transitioning to postgraduate studies.

Section 5: Discussion, Recommendations, Limitations, and Conclusion (Chapters 16 to 18):

1. Chapter 16 presents a discussion of the findings, linking them to the literature and theoretical framework.
2. Chapter 17 outlines the recommendations derived from the research and addresses the study's limitations.
3. Chapter 18 concludes the thesis.

1.9 Included Papers and Approvals

Four papers are integral to this work and are included in this thesis (Chapters 4, 8, 9 and 11). The Doctoral Degree Board has approved the inclusion of all papers, and authors' contributions are detailed prior to each paper.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review - Emergency Care

2.1 The Evolution of Emergency Care and Education in South Africa

Before 1970, local authorities were responsible for emergency services in South Africa.⁴ Recognising the need for more formal training, the then Prehospital Emergency Care Committee (now Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA)), together with the South African College of Medicine, introduced the Emergency Medical Assistant 1 course in the mid-1970s.^{4,13} This course was designed for non-ambulance personnel, allowing entry to the local fire department. Provincial ambulance training colleges linked to fire departments developed similar in-service training opportunities, and in 1985, a four-week Basic Ambulance Assistant (BAA), 12-week Ambulance Emergency Assistant (AEA), and four-month Critical Care Assistant (CCA) short courses were introduced.⁴ These short courses were taught against a rigid set of outcomes and culminated in a pedagogical-style final assessment. Course material followed strict protocols and algorithms, resulting in a graduate who would function under the direction of a medical doctor with a specific skill set.⁴

The BAA, AEA, and CCA courses were initially delivered by provincial training academies, operating under strict clinical governance with a focus on skills and protocol-driven training.⁴ These three short courses constituted the only prehospital training available in South Africa for many years. Apart from the CCA course, which was extended by an additional five months of clinical work, these courses' curriculum outcomes and structure remained largely unchanged over time; see Table 2 for an overview of the short courses.⁴ The brevity of these courses, combined with increasing societal demand for emergency care, made them appealing and affordable, leading to widespread completion by many individuals over subsequent years. However, all three short courses were phased out between 2018 and 2020, and although the courses are no longer offered, many BAAs, AEAs and CCAs are still registered with the HPCSA and practice clinically within South Africa.^{4,34}

2.1.1 The Basic Ambulance Assistant (BAA) Course

Last offered in 2018 (Table 2), the BAA course was a foundational four-week programme designed to equip candidates with essential skills in anatomy, physiology, and the management of common prehospital medical and trauma emergencies.^{32,34} The scope of practice for BAA-certified individuals is limited to non-invasive procedures, focusing on basic emergency care interventions.³³ This entry-level training programme thus prepared participants for roles providing essential, non-invasive prehospital care. To practice clinically, individuals with a BAA certification may work under the supervision of a person registered as an independent practitioner with the HPCSA.

2.1.2 The Ambulance Emergency Assistant (AEA) Course

The AEA course was a four-month programme tailored to candidates who had completed the BAA qualification and accrued at least 1,000 hours of clinical experience.³⁵ It marked the progression from basic to intermediate levels. This programme integrated theoretical education with hands-on practical training conducted in prehospital environments, such as frontline emergency vehicles, and within hospital units, including trauma wards and primary healthcare clinics.³³

The AEA certification expanded the skills acquired during the BAA programme to include certain invasive procedures, enhancing practitioners' ability to manage more challenging emergency cases.³⁵ AEAAs are classified as independent practitioners, meaning they are authorised to practice clinically on their own within their defined scope of practice. This autonomy allows them to perform intermediate-level emergency care interventions while adhering to the standards set by the HPCSA. The AEA course was last offered in 2020 (Table 2).³³

2.1.3 The Critical Care Assistant (CCA) Course

The CCA course was last offered in 2018 (Table 2) and represented the apex of training within the short-course emergency care system, marking the progression from intermediate to advanced levels.^{34,36} Candidates were required to have completed the AEA programme and achieved a minimum of 1,000 emergency care clinical hours to be eligible for the CCA course. The programme comprised 570 hours of theoretical

instruction and 610 hours of clinical practice, encompassing rotations in prehospital care settings, intensive care units, neonatal units, and operating theatres.³⁶

CCAs are classified as independent practitioners, authorised to practice clinically on their own within their defined scope of practice. This advanced qualification enables practitioners to deliver high-level emergency care across diverse, critical healthcare settings while adhering to the HPCSA's standards.³³ The CCA qualification category at the HPCSA is known as ANT; individuals with this qualification are also referred to as 'paramedics', and the term is used as such throughout this research.³⁷ As the highest level of qualification that is not NQF aligned, this is the category of emergency care providers that this research focuses on, and is referred to as '*vocational paramedics*' in the research.

2.2 Advances from Vocational to NQF Qualifications

The emergence of professional qualifications aligned to the NQF in emergency care was driven by the need to bring the profession in line with other recognised health professions in South Africa.^{4,7,13} However, recognising that it would take time to establish higher education qualifications, the presentation of the short courses continued, with the idea of phasing them out once higher education qualifications were established.³⁶

The first higher education qualification was introduced in 1987 as a three-year national diploma offered at technikons (now universities of technology). It was envisaged that the three-year qualification would replace the short courses and equip graduates with additional rescue capabilities, medical skills and knowledge to function as independent prehospital emergency care personnel.^{4,7} In 2003, an undergraduate with a three-year National Diploma in Emergency Care could complete an additional two years of study and obtain a Bachelor of Technology (B Tech) in Emergency Medical Care.^{4,7}

Between 2004 and 2006, the HPCSA initiated a review of emergency care education and training.⁶ Their findings revealed that the short-course curriculum was outdated and no longer compliant with international best practices and the progression of the profession. Furthermore, these courses' learning outcomes were not aligned with the

NQF's standards.⁴ The review culminated on 27 January 2017, when the Minister of Health, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, published new regulations (GN.49 in GG40577 under the Health Professions Act of 1974) that officially phased out the short courses in 2018; the last short courses ran in 2020.^{34,38} This decisive action signalled the end of an era for prehospital emergency care short courses, which had been a mainstay since the early 1980s, creating a new chapter of education for South African paramedics.^{6,7}

2.3 Current Pathways in Emergency Care

Currently, South Africa offers a three-tiered undergraduate framework of qualifications in emergency medical care, each accredited by the HPCSA and aligned with specific NQF levels, durations, and professional registration categories. These qualifications serve as entry points into the field of emergency medicine, establishing foundational and advanced skills for various roles. All these undergraduate programmes are offered exclusively as full-time courses at universities.

In 2005, master's and doctorate programmes were introduced, offering theoretical or research-based qualifications. However, these advanced degrees do not alter the registration category of the individuals who complete them. Table 2 and Table 5 illustrate the listings of current South African emergency medical care undergraduate qualifications with HPCSA registrations.

Table 2: Past and Current EMS Qualifications in Emergency Care in South Africa – Vocational and Undergraduate Qualification

Vocational qualification	Certificate level	Duration of short course	HPCSA PBEC registration category	Date of last registration at the HPCSA
Basic Ambulance Assistants (BAA)	Basic	4-5 weeks	BAA	26 January 2018
Ambulance Emergency Assistants (AEA)	Intermediate	3 months	ANA	26 January 2020
Critical Care Assistant (CCA)	Advanced	9 months	ANT	26 January 2018
Undergraduate Qualification	NQF Level	Duration of Qualification	HPCSA PBEC Registration Category	Introduction Year
Higher Certificate in Emergency Medical Care	5	1 year full-time	ECA	2019
Diploma in Emergency Medical Care	6	2 years full-time	ANT	2016
Bachelor's Degree: Emergency Medical Care	8	4 years full-time	ECP	2011

Each emergency medical care qualification is a standalone programme, though learners can start at the higher certificate level and progress to advanced qualifications if they choose. Programmes are designed with a scope of practice, reflecting progressively advanced responsibilities and capabilities as learners move up the qualification ladder.³³ Once registered with the HPCSA under the Professional Board for Emergency Care (PBEC), emergency care providers are authorised to work clinically, though they must adhere strictly to the scope of practice defined by their qualifications and registration category. The NQF-aligned qualifications that define

these categories of registered emergency care providers are discussed in the sections below.

2.3.1 Higher Certificate in Emergency Medical Care

The Higher Certificate in Emergency Medical Care is an entry-level qualification designed to equip candidates with the foundational knowledge and practical skills required for emergency medical care.⁴ Registered at NQF Level 5, this undergraduate qualification spans one year of full-time study and serves as the initial step for individuals seeking to enter the EMS field. Graduates of this programme qualify as Emergency Care Assistants (ECAs) and are registered with the HPCSA under the PBEC in the ECA category.

These individuals' scope of practice exceeds that of the BAA programme, although both are currently registered for supervised practice at the HPCSA. The higher certificate is tailored for individuals aiming to provide non-invasive emergency care at the prehospital level, focusing on stabilising patients during transport.^{33,34,38}

2.3.2 Diploma in Emergency Medical Care

The Diploma in Emergency Medical Care represents the next tier of EMS training. This qualification, registered at NQF Level 6, requires two years of undergraduate full-time study and is intended for individuals who have already entered the EMS field and seek to advance their skills and responsibilities. Graduates are registered with the HPCSA PBEC under the ANT category.

Introduced around 2016, the diploma bridges the gap between entry-level and advanced EMS qualifications, aligning with National Emergency Care Education and Training Policy (NECET) policy directives to create a structured and progressive training pathway.⁴ The curriculum integrates theoretical education with practical clinical training in diverse environments, such as prehospital emergency vehicles, trauma units, and primary healthcare settings. The scope of practice of the diploma graduate is the same as that of the CCA.³⁴ This qualification equips practitioners with the ability to perform intermediate-level emergency care interventions, including certain invasive procedures, and manage more complex medical and trauma emergencies.³⁵

2.3.3 Bachelor's Degree in Emergency Medical Care

The Bachelor's Degree in Emergency Medical Care is the highest undergraduate qualification in the field, designed to produce Emergency Care Practitioners (ECPs) who can operate at an advanced level in EMS. Registered at NQF Level 8, this programme spans four years of full-time undergraduate study and combines theoretical instruction with extensive practical training in prehospital and in-hospital settings.

This degree equips graduates with advanced clinical knowledge, leadership skills, and the ability to provide comprehensive emergency medical care and engage in critical decision-making in high-pressure environments. The programme also includes rotations through various specialised units, such as intensive care, neonatal care, and trauma, alongside advanced prehospital care scenarios. Graduates are registered with the HPCSA PBEC as ECPs, granting them the authority to perform a broad range of advanced medical procedures and take on leadership roles in EMS.³³

Per the HPCSA's *Emergency Care Capabilities and Medications* guidelines, the scope of practice for vocational paramedics and those holding a Diploma in Emergency Care is the same as both are registered under the 'ANT' category at the HPCSA.³³ This equivalence in authorised skillsets thus offers limited motivation for vocational paramedics to pursue higher education through the diploma qualification.

2.4 RPL

RPL is an educational and developmental mechanism designed to evaluate and formally acknowledge the knowledge, skills, and competencies individuals acquire outside formal academic environments.¹⁰ This includes workplace experience, informal training, and non-formal learning opportunities.¹⁰ RPL plays a pivotal role in widening access to higher education by validating prior achievements and providing alternative pathways for learners who may not meet conventional entry requirements.¹⁰ Rooted in social justice and lifelong learning principles, RPL seeks to address systemic educational inequities, particularly in contexts where traditional qualifications fail to reflect individuals' real-world expertise.³⁹⁻⁴³

In South Africa, RPL emerged as a cornerstone of the NQF, introduced in 1995 to create an integrated education system that recognised diverse learning pathways, particularly for historically disadvantaged groups.⁷ The NQF serves as the legislative backbone for RPL implementation, aligning with SAQA's National Policy for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning; it establishes benchmarks for comparing prior learning to qualification requirements.^{7,10} SAQA defines RPL as a process for comparing prior learning against the requirements of a qualification to determine if the learning outcome is sufficient for access, advanced standing, or exemption.¹⁰ The 2019 amended policy mandates that RPL achievements be treated with equivalency to conventional learning routes, ensuring parity of esteem in certification, and requiring institutions to uphold quality assurance standards across RPL assessments.¹⁰

Many regulatory and professional bodies endorse RPL as a tool fostering equity and advancing workforce development across sectors. For example, the Health Professions Act (No. 56 of 1974) sets guidelines ensuring that RPL aligns with competency standards in professions such as emergency medical care.^{4,10,38} Similarly, professional councils in nursing, teaching, and engineering have incorporated RPL into their frameworks to enable career progression.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁷ This approach reflects broader global trends of endorsing RPL as a mechanism to promote inclusivity in education and workforce development.^{45,48}

Globally, RPL has been increasingly recognised as a mechanism for bridging the gap between vocational and academic qualifications. Countries like Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have developed comprehensive RPL frameworks that formalise skills acquired outside traditional academic settings, enabling seamless transitions from vocational to higher education.^{47,48} However, while RPL is primarily leveraged internationally to enhance access to education and workforce mobility, its implementation in South Africa has particularly focused on addressing historical inequities and creating opportunities for previously disadvantaged communities.¹⁰

RPL should be understood not merely as an administrative mechanism for access or redress, but as a pedagogical practice grounded in established educational theories.

Experiential learning theory affirms that learning emerges through reflection on experience, a concept particularly relevant to adult learners with substantial workplace knowledge.^{8,49} This aligns closely with Knowles' theory of andragogy (1980), which highlights self-direction, relevance, and learner autonomy as central principles in adult education.⁵⁰ These theoretical perspectives emphasise that RPL candidates, especially those entering postgraduate study from vocational pathways, require more than formal recognition; they may also need academic mediation to support their integration into formal academic environments.

2.5 Implementation of RPL

RPL is implemented in two primary forms: to grant access to a qualification programme, or to allow advanced standing or exemption from specific modules or courses within a qualification, each serving distinct purposes in higher education. RPL for access provides an alternative route into higher education by allowing individuals without formal qualifications to demonstrate their readiness for academic study.^{7,10} It is particularly prevalent in undergraduate programmes, enabling learners to bridge the gap between vocational training and academia.¹⁰ RPL for advanced standing or exemption enables candidates to be exempted from specific modules that form part of a qualification, without the awarding of credits for those modules. While this can reduce the time and cost of completing a degree, it requires rigorous alignment between prior learning outcomes and academic curricula.¹⁰

Despite its potential, RPL's implementation varies widely across institutions and professions. While some higher educational institutions (HEIs) have robust RPL frameworks, others have limited resources, inconsistent policies, and insufficient staff training to support the process.^{14,51} SAQA reported that approximately 15% of South African HEIs actively utilised RPL frameworks as of 2020, demonstrating widespread adoption gaps.⁴⁹ Additionally, RPL in HEIs in South Africa predominantly focuses on undergraduate entry, with fewer options for advanced qualifications. Although national policy permits RPL for access into postgraduate programmes, its uptake is constrained by institutional conservatism, limited examples of precedent, and concerns about academic integrity. As noted by the CHE, RPL at the postgraduate level often requires a higher level of academic mediation and discipline-specific expertise, which many

institutions are not adequately resourced to provide.¹⁴ This creates persistent access barriers for experienced professionals with substantial non-formal or workplace learning, particularly those from vocational backgrounds seeking vertical progression within the NQF.

RPL must be clearly distinguished from CAT which applies to formal, credit-bearing learning and enables students to transfer previously earned credits across qualifications, institutions, or sub-frameworks of the NQF.⁵¹ Unlike RPL, which is based on the assessment of experiential or informal learning and results in exemption rather than credits, CAT allows for the recognition and inclusion of previously awarded credits in a new qualification structure.^{10,51} Together, these systems offer complementary but distinct mechanisms for promoting articulation and lifelong learning.

The theoretical foundations of RPL are rooted in principles of equity, redress, and lifelong learning.¹⁰ It draws from adult education theories recognising that valuable learning occurs outside formal settings, and is guided by social justice objectives that aim to broaden access for marginalised or professionally experienced individuals who were historically excluded from higher education opportunities.⁵¹ The CHE and SAQA frameworks both promote RPL as a strategic enabler for transformation, mobility, and progression within the post-school education system.^{10,14}

In the context of this study, RPL for access is particularly relevant, as it enables experienced vocational paramedics trained through the former short-course system to gain entry into postgraduate programmes without meeting the formal admission requirements typically associated with undergraduate qualifications, through the completion and submission of an RPL portfolio.

2.6 Challenges in Entering Higher Education using RPL pathways

Broadly speaking, RPL pathways provide vocational learners with an opportunity to transition into higher education by recognising their prior experience and skills. While this approach broadens access to education, it introduces several challenges for

learners due to the fundamental differences between vocational and academic systems.^{1,17,20-22} Some of these challenges are discussed in the sections that follow.

2.6.1 Mismatch between vocational and higher education learning approaches

Vocational education prioritises hands-on training, practical skills, and immediate workforce readiness. These programmes address industry-specific needs, equipping learners with tangible competencies rather than abstract theoretical knowledge.⁵² The direct connection between vocational curricula and real-world applications enhances learner motivation and engagement.²² However, the misalignment between vocational learning and the theoretical and independent learning demands of higher education often leaves vocational learners struggling to adjust to the academic demands of university life. They are consequently required to develop new skills and engage with complex theories unfamiliar to their vocational training background.^{1,22,52}

2.6.2 The cultural and institutional adjustment

The cultural shift from vocational institutions to universities presents additional challenges for vocational learners. Vocational training environments are typically structured, outcome-focused, and practical, providing learners with a clear framework and hands-on guidance.^{12,53} In contrast, universities place greater emphasis on independence, self-direction, and theoretical engagement, which can feel unfamiliar and isolating for learners accustomed to the guided nature of vocational training.^{20,22} Studies have highlighted that vocational learners often face difficulties integrating into the academic culture of higher education.^{20,22,52,54}

2.6.3 Balancing multiple responsibilities

Vocational learners pursuing higher education through RPL pathways often encounter the added demands of balancing established careers and family responsibilities. The dual demands of professional responsibilities and academic study can become overwhelming, particularly for learners already navigating financial constraints and limited flexibility in study options.^{12,20,22,54}

While these challenges are not unique to the emergency care profession, their occurrence within this context presents a distinctive set of considerations. Professions rooted in vocational training, such as nursing, have similarly faced structural and

educational barriers when aligning prior experiential learning with formal academic progression.^{19,22,46,59} Comparable patterns are evident in sectors such as engineering and teaching, where individuals with substantial practical expertise often struggle to access or succeed in higher education^{41,44,45}

However, what distinguishes this study is not only the focus on vocational paramedics entering postgraduate study for the first time, but also the layered complexity of their learning context. The leap from vocational to postgraduate studies, together with the online context, has the potential to present compounded challenges in academic adaptation, digital literacy, and sustained engagement.⁵⁷ These factors intersect with the demands of part-time study, often undertaken alongside professional and personal responsibilities, creating a distinct combination of conditions under which learners must operate.⁵⁵⁻⁵⁸ This study draws on principles of andragogy to explore how these learners engage with and respond to academic support structures.⁵⁰ Unlike pedagogical models, which centre on dependent learning, andragogical approaches highlight self-direction, prior experience, and practical relevance.⁵⁰ The online delivery of the programme adds an additional layer of complexity, as it requires learners to develop digital literacy, self-regulation, and the ability to engage meaningfully without the reinforcement of face-to-face interaction, potentially creating new barriers to learning.

2.7 Workforce Shortages and the Need for EMS Education

The shortage of emergency care providers in South Africa further compounds the systemic challenges vocational paramedics face in accessing higher education.⁶⁰ This creates a need to balance workforce development with accessible education.

According to the HPCSA, the latest available data (2019) depicted the country has 1,491 registered ANTs (CCA and Diploma in Emergency Medical Care Graduates) and 737 ECPs (Table 2).⁶⁰ This totals 2,228 emergency care providers delivering advanced life support to a population of approximately 60 million, resulting in a ratio of 3.71 per 100,000 people. In contrast, the United States and Australia report ratios of 78.8 and 91.7 per 100,000 people, respectively, underscoring the severity of South Africa's workforce deficit.^{61,62}

In addition to this shortage, the continual efflux of skilled paramedics migrating abroad for better opportunities has resulted in a “brain drain”, further depleting South Africa’s already limited pool of experienced professionals.⁶³ Therefore, as the demand for emergency care services continues to grow, the gap in workforce development threatens to deepen health inequities.^{60,64} Moreover, although RPL was introduced as a national directive to advance education and workforce development, it remains underutilised in emergency medical education contexts.^{4,10}

2.8 RPL for Vocational Paramedics

Vocational paramedics in South Africa represent a group that could greatly benefit from RPL, given their extensive practical experience and training in emergency care.^{3,14,41} These individuals face substantial challenges, including long work hours, financial constraints, and limited flexibility in study options.^{13,65} At the undergraduate level, the equivalency between the Diploma in Emergency Medical Care and the vocational paramedics’ scope of practice limits opportunities for career advancement (Table 2). Paramedics are consequently confined to their current clinical and operational roles, preventing them from achieving academic growth.³³ Moreover, while RPL provides a pathway to access the Bachelor’s Degree in Emergency Medical Care, pursuing this option still requires paramedics to commit to at least three years of full-time education.

However, there is a growing availability of postgraduate programmes that offer alternative pathways for professional advancement. One such initiative is the PGDip EC, introduced by UCT’s Division of Emergency Medicine. The programme is accessible for healthcare professionals seeking to further their education without disrupting their careers.⁶⁶

2.9 UCT Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care

In 2021, UCT’s Division of Emergency Medicine introduced the PGDip EC, an NQF Level 8, one-year standalone programme.⁶⁶ This initiative was aimed at addressing identified educational gaps, including the perceived disconnect between

undergraduate emergency care qualifications and master's programmes.^{4,13,67} The programme also targets learners who are ineligible for master's degrees, those not pursuing research-oriented studies, and those unable to attend compulsory contact sessions required by other qualifications.⁶⁷ The online format is particularly advantageous for individuals in rural and remote areas, where access to advanced educational opportunities is limited, as it requires no travel or contact sessions. Therefore, while emergency medicine has advanced as a specialised field in urban regions, the PGDip EC recognises the need for educational initiatives to support rural healthcare providers.^{64,65}

2.9.1 Programme design

The PGDip EC programme was designed for healthcare professionals such as doctors, nurses, and paramedics working in emergency care across South Africa and the African continent.⁶⁷ Consisting of 120 credits, each representing approximately 10 notional work hours, the programme requires an estimated 20 hours of learner engagement per week.⁹ This structure ensures the programme accommodates healthcare professionals' demanding schedules while offering a pathway for academic and professional advancement. The PGDip EC comprises six courses (Table 3), does not include a clinical component, and does not alter the clinical scope of practice or registration requirements with governing bodies for paramedics or nurses. This design ensures that the programme focuses on theoretical knowledge and practical application within existing professional frameworks.

Table 3: Overview of PGDip EC Courses

Course name	Semester and duration	Credits	Overview
Introduction to Postgraduate Studies	Semester 1 Duration: 8 weeks	10	This course focuses on individuals achieving the basic skill set to succeed in postgraduate studies. It covers topics like searching literature and using a number of medical databases, plagiarism avoidance, time management in study and research, how to structure and write

Course name	Semester and duration	Credits	Overview
			assignments, and how to do research presentations.
Concepts in Emergency Care	Semester 1 Duration: 10 weeks	20	This course provides candidates with basic insight into the differences between emergency care and other medical fields. It introduces the EMS and healthcare systems, principles of adult and paediatric triage, principles of emergency care diagnostics, and aspects of teamwork, handover and communication.
Adult Emergency Medicine	Semester 1 Duration: 18 weeks	30	This course focuses on adult emergency care. It is a problem-based course emphasising evidence-based medicine and critical thinking. The course takes a system-based approach to the undifferentiated patient presenting for emergency care. It encompasses common problems and differential pathways, as well as relevant basic physiology and anatomy, and deals with the management of common adult medical and surgical emergencies and the evidence base for these recommendations.
Child Health for Emergency Care	Semester 2 Duration: 18 weeks	30	This course focuses on key aspects of child health for emergency care. The module is divided into three sections. Section one begins with an overview of recent data on global child mortality. Linked to this is an exploration of the causes of these tragic deaths and an exploration of the global health community's actions to reduce these unnecessary deaths. The course examines referral pathways and the journeys taken by children seeking emergency care in learners' own settings. It looks at some of the widely available tools for managing childhood emergencies. This section concludes with an in-

Course name	Semester and duration	Credits	Overview
			depth appraisal of the healthy child in terms of factors such as nutrition, growth, development and immunisations. Section two involves a closer look at the top causes of child mortality. The third section introduces learners to the concepts of child rights, consent, and health professionals' reporting obligations in the emergency care field.
Research Literacy	Semester 2 Duration: 9 weeks	15	The course teaches learners to think like a researcher and develop an understanding of the research process. It introduces key concepts for developing a postgraduate research proposal, including research ethics, design, and academic writing. In addition, the course introduces learners to quantitative and qualitative research approaches, including the principles of critical thinking and evidence-based medicine.
Leadership and Patient Safety	Semester 2 Duration: 9 weeks	15	The course provides an overview of basic managerial skills, with a focus on setting objectives, implementing plans and conducting reviews. Resource management is also presented, e.g. staffing schedules, basic human resource processes, and financial management. The aim is to make content practical and applicable to the senior/shift leader level, not the first-line manager level. It provides in-depth knowledge of the principles of patient safety that learners can use to improve the care delivered in their own emergency centres.

The PGDip EC programme's development was supported by the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT) at UCT.⁶⁷ The CILT provides expertise in curriculum development and the integration of learning technologies for both online and in-person

teaching.⁶⁷ A formal agreement was signed with the CILT to support the programme's development for its inaugural year of delivery.

Educational theories, such as the persona-based learning design, the ABC curriculum development framework, and Laurillard's conversational framework, informed the programme's design.⁶⁸⁻⁷² These methodologies ensured the programme addressed the needs of a diverse and geographically dispersed learner cohort with varied working schedules, online learning experiences, and academic literacy skills.⁷³

2.9.2 Admission to the PGDip EC through RPL for Access

The Division of Emergency Medicine decided to include vocational paramedics, specifically those holding CCA qualifications, as eligible applicants through an RPL process. The RPL process and portfolio requirements were developed in alignment with UCT's RPL policy, consultations with other UCT divisions and departments running RPL programmes, and input from other universities with established RPL initiatives.^{10,73}

Eligible candidates were expected to compile a detailed portfolio of evidence that incorporated their professional experience, academic background, continuing education, and community contributions. In addition to this evidence, they were required to complete three structured tasks: a reflective piece on selected achievements, a critique of a prescribed journal article, and a short academic essay. These portfolios were assessed individually using a rubric shared with candidates at the outset of the process, which was informed by a consensus document reflecting the Division of Emergency Medicine's values and strategic objectives. Candidates' portfolios were then presented and discussed at a selection meeting, with the selection committee comprising course conveners, lecturers within the division, and a representative of the transformation committee.

All RPL candidates had to apply via the University system to be considered for RPL. Successful candidates were informed after the selection committee reached consensus with registration following shortly after. It is important to note that the present research did not investigate the assessment of the portfolio process, but

rather the research considers successful candidates once they were on the programme.

The PGDip EC sets a transformative precedent for vocational paramedics, providing them with new opportunities to advance their qualifications and careers. Thus, if RPL for access is utilised, this programme allows vocationally trained paramedics to attain a postgraduate diploma at NQF Level 8 in just one year, compared to entering and completing an undergraduate diploma at NQF Level 6 in the same timeframe. While neither qualification changes the current scope of practice, the NQF Level 8 postgraduate diploma provides enhanced academic recognition and broader opportunities for professional growth.

However, vocational learners transitioning into higher education may require additional support to navigate the academic and institutional demands of university life.^{1,24,74} Universities typically offer a range of support structures to enhance all learners' success and well-being.

2.10 Support Structures in Higher Education

Universities' support structures typically encompass academic assistance, health and wellness resources, career guidance, and inclusivity initiatives.^{21,75} Academic support often includes tutoring, writing centres, and study skills workshops designed to help learners meet rigorous academic standards. Health and wellness services provide medical care, psychological counselling, and programmes promoting healthy lifestyles. Career services assist learners in exploring career options, developing professional skills, and connecting with potential employers.^{75,76}

The functioning of support structures in higher education often differs from those in vocational institutions. Vocational training colleges in South Africa frequently provide accessible and centralised support services, including coordinators who guide learners through administrative and academic processes, creating a highly supportive environment.^{13,24} In contrast, HEIs typically feature decentralised and less personalised support systems, many of which require in-person attendance and self-directed navigation.^{12,23} These differences can present challenges for vocational

learners transitioning to higher education, as they may lack familiarity with the self-directed approach required to navigate university systems effectively.

2.11 Support Structures at UCT

Table 4 displays some of the support services offered by UCT.⁷⁵ While not exhaustive, this list highlights key resources designed to support learners academically, socially, and financially, providing an overview of the diverse assistance available to help them navigate their university journey.

Table 4: Support Services at UCT

Category	Service	Description
Academic Support	Libraries	Learners can request books, get referencing help, and search for articles, videos, and eBooks.
	Virtual Library Service	Offers information and referencing support.
	eBook Platforms	Learners can find online textbooks and eBooks for every subject.
	Information and Communication Technology Services	Provides software packages.
	Writing Centre	Offers one-on-one consultation sessions.
	UCT English Language Centre	Offers general English courses at all levels year-round.
	UCT Knowledge Co-op	Links learners to community partners for research projects.
	UCT eResearch	Provides support for researchers at every step of the research data lifecycle.
	International Academic Programmes Office	Supports international postgraduate learners with immigration issues, study visas, and outgoing mobility opportunities.
Transitional Support	First-Year Experience	Helps new learners transition to university life through structured orientation, academic workshops, mentorship, and peer support initiatives.

Category	Service	Description
Other Support Services	Learner Wellness	Provides medical and counselling services.
	Disability Service	Supports learners with disabilities.
	Careers Service	Provides career consultations, employer networking events, and more.
	Teaching Resources	Provides detailed 'how to' guides, including text guides and screencasts for specific online teaching practices.
Financial Support	UCT Financial Aid Office	Offers guidance on applying for financial aid, managing learner loans, and accessing scholarships or bursaries.
	Learner Funding	Administers and manages financial awards, such as scholarships, grants, and bursaries to support learners in need.
	Funding Advice and Support	Provides information sessions and individual consultations to help learners explore financial aid options and manage educational expenses.

Additionally, UCT provides a dedicated online resource hub for undergraduate and postgraduate learners. These resources address the different needs of learners at various stages of their academic careers.

2.11.1 Postgraduate and postdoctoral resources

UCT offers comprehensive guidance for postgraduate learners, including tools for academic success, research support, and funding opportunities. These resources are complemented with services for postdoctoral researchers to assist with career planning, publishing, and accessing grants. The site also provides essential information on administrative processes, workshops, and writing retreats to support postgraduate scholarship.⁷⁷

2.11.2 Undergraduate resources

Undergraduate learners can access a variety of online tools to enhance their academic experience. These include platforms for managing coursework, tips for improving study techniques, and links to support services tailored to their unique academic and personal needs. This centralised site ensures that all learners have access to the information required to navigate university life effectively.⁷⁸

2.11.3 Online resource access

Despite the wide range of services offered, postgraduate learners often underutilise them.^{79,80} This challenge is compounded by the competing demands of research, coursework, and personal responsibilities, making it difficult for learners to seek out or prioritise these resources.^{24,59,76,79,81} To address this phenomenon, universities post information about their support services on their learning management system (LMS) to drive learners towards these resources.⁸² Additionally, services are frequently introduced during undergraduate 'first-year experiences', designed to familiarise learners with available support.⁸³

As the PGDip EC programme is delivered online, it does not include a physical orientation, which may limit opportunities for learners to familiarise themselves with the university culture, support services, and academic expectations through in-person interactions. Additionally, those entering university studies for the first time would not have encountered traditional 'first-year experiences'. All information regarding support services is thus shared through the programme's LMS and the programme outline.⁹ This includes links to academic tools, wellness resources, and programme-specific administrative assistance. Additional information is easily accessible on the UCT website.⁷⁵ This approach ensures that PGDip EC learners have access to the necessary support resources to navigate their academic journey effectively.

It may take time for learners to locate and navigate academic resources, and if they are not aware of what is available, they are unlikely to search for it. For vocationally trained paramedics admitted through RPL, this challenge is compounded by limited prior exposure to university-level study and online learning environments. The shift into the PGDip EC therefore represents not only a transition in academic level but also a fundamental change in mode of delivery, requiring digital navigation skills, self-

regulation, and the capacity to engage meaningfully in virtual online environments. These demands are not confined to RPL candidates, as all learners are required to adapt to the fully online format of the programme, though vocationally trained learners may experience the transition more acutely. Literature shows that similar shifts in other professions are often accompanied by difficulties in adapting to online education, raising the question of whether vocational paramedics entering postgraduate study through RPL face comparable barriers to engagement, persistence, and academic integration.

CHAPTER 3: A Targeted Review of Educational Theories

3.1 Introduction

Adult learning recognises that mature learners bring accumulated life experience, practical knowledge, and intrinsic motivation into educational contexts. Foundational theories such as Knowles' andragogy emphasise self-direction, understood as the learner's capacity to take initiative, set goals, and regulate their own progress, as well as the relevance of learning to immediate needs.⁵⁰ Kolb's experiential learning theory similarly highlights the cyclical process of reflecting on and applying experience as a driver of knowledge construction, while also emphasising that adult learning involves cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions.⁸⁵

Theoretical perspectives provide various lenses for explaining how adults acquire and process knowledge. For example, Cognitive Development Theory, a perspective most often applied in early education, conceptualises learning as a biologically driven progression through universal stages of maturation. It emphasises internal equilibrium and learner readiness, framing knowledge acquisition as a function of independent exploration.⁸⁶ While valuable in the context of early education, this model is less suited to the diverse and non-linear trajectories of adults who bring accumulated life and work experiences into academic settings

Behaviourist theories, such as operant conditioning, describe learning as a conditioned response to external stimuli, reinforced through repetition and reward.⁸⁷ This perspective is applicable in technical or procedural training, where task automation and routine practice are essential. However, behaviourism has been criticised for its limited explanatory value in postgraduate contexts, where reflective, metacognitive, and theoretical demands require higher-order thinking and abstraction.^{86,87}

Cognitive constructivism contributes further insights by emphasising the learner's active role in discovery and the importance of scaffolding, with Bruner's spiral curriculum illustrating how knowledge may be revisited with increasing complexity.⁸⁸ While this perspective offers pedagogical strategies, it remains largely psychological

and individualistic, with limited attention to the social and institutional conditions that shape learning.⁸⁶⁻⁸⁸

Situated Learning Theory (SLT) provides another perspective, conceptualising learning as a process of legitimate peripheral participation within communities of practice.⁸⁹ It emphasises enculturation into social groups and the gradual acquisition of expertise through observation and interaction. SLT is associated with vocational learning environments, where peer-based immersion and practical apprenticeship are common. However, its reliance on extended, informal participation makes it less applicable to structured, time-bound higher education programmes, where learners must rapidly adapt to academic discourse and institutional expectations.^{87,89}

Bernstein's theory of pedagogic discourse offers a contrasting sociological perspective by analysing how educational knowledge is classified, framed, and distributed within formal systems.⁹⁰ This approach highlights how vocational knowledge is positioned within hierarchies of value, often subordinated to academic knowledge in higher education. While it is valuable in critiquing inequality and power relations, pedagogic discourse theory provides limited pedagogical strategies for supporting learners at an individual level, as it does not engage with the micro-processes of learning or mechanisms of scaffolding.^{86,90}

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) provides a further perspective by positioning learning as a socially mediated process, shaped by interaction with others and the use of cultural tools.^{2,30} Rather than viewing learning as a solitary or internally driven act, SCT situates development within social and institutional contexts, emphasising the role of interaction with more experienced individuals and systems of support.^{2,30,86} Central to SCT is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the space between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can accomplish with the guidance of More Knowledgeable Others (MKO).^{2,30} This orientation shifts emphasis away from purely individual development and towards the role of collaboration, mediation, and context in shaping learning.

While each of these theories contributes valuable perspectives on adult learning, they do not fully address the particular context of this research, which explores the support needs of vocational paramedics transitioning into postgraduate education through

RPL for access. Cognitive and behaviourist models focus primarily on individual processes or stimulus-response conditioning, offering limited value for understanding how learners who possess extensive workplace-based competence engage with abstract academic discourse.⁸⁷ SLT and pedagogic discourse theory illuminate important social and structural dynamics yet they provide little practical guidance for supporting learners in structured and time-bound programmes such as the PGDip EC.^{89,90} This study required a theoretical framework that could integrate individual development with social interaction, acknowledge the legitimacy of prior vocational competence, and account for the institutional mediation necessary for success. Vygotsky's SCT was selected because it offers this balance, conceptualising learning as a socially mediated process where prior experience can be scaffolded into new domains of academic knowledge through interaction with others, the use of cultural tools, and engagement with institutional structures.^{2,30,86,91} The following section therefore considers SCT in greater detail and its relevance for understanding the transition of vocational learners into postgraduate education.

3.2 Justification for the Use of SCT

This research adopts Vygotsky's SCT because it provides a framework that aligns closely with the experiences of vocational learners transitioning into postgraduate education through RPL. Vocational learners often bring well-established procedural competence but may require structured support in adapting to the academic and institutional demands of higher education. In the PGDip EC, the one-year programme structure limits opportunities for extended, iterative learning, which makes scaffolding strategies especially important for facilitating academic adaptation.^{30,31,91} This orientation also reflects national imperatives to strengthen pathways into higher education by recognising and developing prior learning as a legitimate route for access.¹⁰

Other theories such as Bernstein's pedagogic discourse, Piaget's cognitive development theory, or Lave and Wenger's SLT provide valuable insights.^{86,89,90} Bernstein's framework highlights structural inequalities but offers limited guidance at the level of the individual learner.⁹⁰ Piaget's model, grounded in universal stages, does not fully account for the influence of social or institutional mediation in adult learning.⁸⁶

SLT illuminates vocational apprenticeship but assumes extended informal participation, which contrasts with the time-bound and structured demands of the PGDip EC.⁸⁹ In contrast, SCT integrates individual development with institutional and social mediation, emphasising supported learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This makes it well suited to framing the dynamic and often non-linear transitions experienced by vocational learners.

Vygotsky's SCT is not without limitations. Critics have pointed to its absence of clear developmental stages and its limited engagement with motivation and emotion.³⁰ These aspects are important in adult and vocational learning, where confidence, identity, and resilience may influence educational outcomes. Nevertheless, SCT is not adopted here as a comprehensive theory of learning but as a tool for conceptualising support strategies that scaffold learners effectively. Its recursive potential allows movement between independence and guided support, reflecting the lived experiences of vocational learners who must draw upon existing knowledge while adapting to new academic demands.

For these reasons, SCT was selected as the theoretical foundation of this research. It provides a lens through which to conceptualise the support needs of vocational learners in transition and aligns with institutional and policy priorities for widening access through RPL.

Building on this justification, it is necessary to consider in greater detail how Vygotsky conceptualised learning within interconnected developmental zones. These zones illustrate the ways in which learners move from independent ability to guided participation and ultimately to mastery, providing a useful framework for understanding how vocational learners may bridge the gap between prior experiential competence and the demands of postgraduate study.

3.3 The Zones of Development

Vygotsky conceptualised learning as occurring across three interconnected zones of development, which describe different stages in a learner's progression (Figure 1).^{2,30} The Zone of Actual Development (ZAD) represents the skills and knowledge a learner can demonstrate independently. The ZPD encompasses tasks that the learner cannot

yet perform alone but can achieve with guidance, highlighting their potential for growth through targeted support. Beyond this lies the Zone of Distal Development (ZDD), which includes skills and knowledge currently beyond the learner's capacity, even with assistance, representing future learning potential.³⁰

This conceptualisation is useful in understanding how individuals with vocational backgrounds who access higher education through RPL may progress through formal academic environments. Many such candidates enter with well-established practical competence (ZAD) but require support to engage with the abstract reasoning and disciplinary conventions typical of postgraduate study (ZPD). The ZDD remains a theoretical space for future development, but one that can inform long-term curriculum planning and targeted support.^{2,30} These zones are not fixed boundaries but fluid stages through which learners may move as they are supported to engage in new and increasingly complex academic tasks.^{2,30}

Figure 1 illustrates these zones as a continuum, highlighting the central role of support in enabling movement from existing knowledge to future capability.^{2,30}

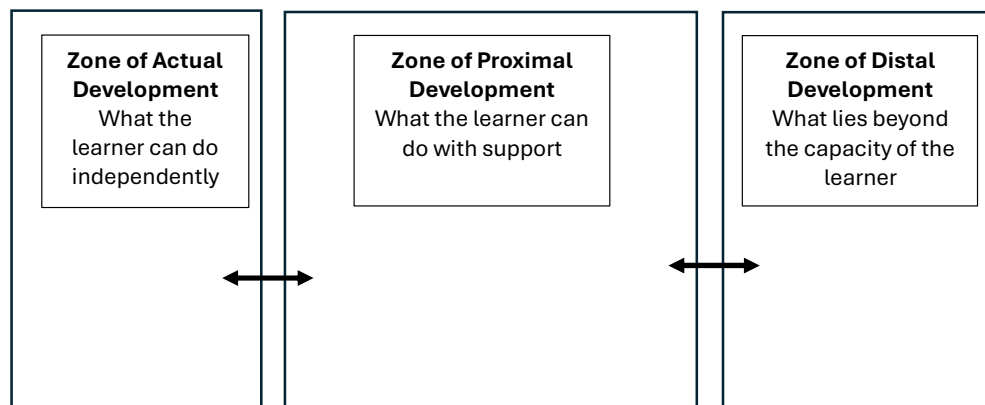


Figure 1: Vygotsky's Zones of Development

3.4 Scaffolding

The concept of scaffolding, closely associated with Vygotsky's ZPD, was later introduced by educational psychologist Jerome Bruner as part of cognitive constructivist theory in the late 1950s.⁸⁸ Bruner expanded upon Vygotsky's

foundational ideas by emphasising the dynamic role of structured support provided by educators or peers, enabling learners to perform tasks beyond their independent capabilities.^{30,31} This structured support, referred to as scaffolding, is gradually withdrawn as learners gain proficiency and confidence, ultimately fostering autonomy in learning. This perspective aligns with Vygotsky's focus on the collaborative construction of knowledge through engagement with MKOs.³¹

The term 'scaffolding' derives from its practical use in construction, which refers to the temporary structure erected to support workers and materials during the building process. Scaffolding holds everything in place, allowing workers to reach higher areas safely and efficiently.⁸⁸ Once the building becomes stable at a given phase, the scaffolding is removed or adjusted to support new areas as construction progresses.

This metaphor is particularly apt in education, where scaffolding provides learners with the temporary support to build their understanding and skills.³¹ As in construction, educational scaffolding ensures stability and access while allowing for progressive growth and development. Therefore, as learners advance, support is gradually adapted or removed, enabling them to take full responsibility for their learning journey.²²

The effectiveness of scaffolding in various educational contexts, particularly in supporting learners transitioning into more complex learning environments, is well-documented in the literature.^{22,91} For example, scaffolded learning interventions have improved critical thinking and problem-solving skills, aligning with Vygotsky's emphasis on fostering higher-order cognitive functions.^{22,30,91} This may be particularly relevant for vocational learners who enter higher education with strong practical skills but limited exposure to abstract and theoretical reasoning.

This concept of scaffolding thus provides a valuable theory for understanding vocational learners' transition into higher education. These learners, entering a new and often unfamiliar academic environment, may require structured support to navigate challenges posed by academic, institutional, and personal expectations.⁹¹ Scaffolding addresses these demands by offering temporary support suited to their

needs.^{91,92} Like building a scaffold, this support can be gradually reduced or adjusted as learners gain confidence and develop the skills necessary for independent learning.

Scaffolding should thus not be viewed as a permanent support structure but as a dynamic and adaptable system, ensuring that learners receive the assistance they need while fostering autonomy over time.⁹² It is important to distinguish this broader conceptualisation of scaffolding from its narrower application in learning design, which typically focuses on instructional strategies.⁹² Although learning design contributes to scaffolding, the broader perspective includes institutional, academic, and social supports for facilitating transition into higher education.

3.5 Vygotsky’s Theory and Adult Learning

While Vygotsky’s original work focused on children, his concepts equally apply to adult learners. Adult learners bring rich life experiences and practical skills to their educational journey, forming their ZAD.^{91,93-96} These experiences provide a strong foundation, but as adult learners transition to higher education, they encounter new academic challenges that require them to develop new skills, necessitating support within their ZPD.³¹

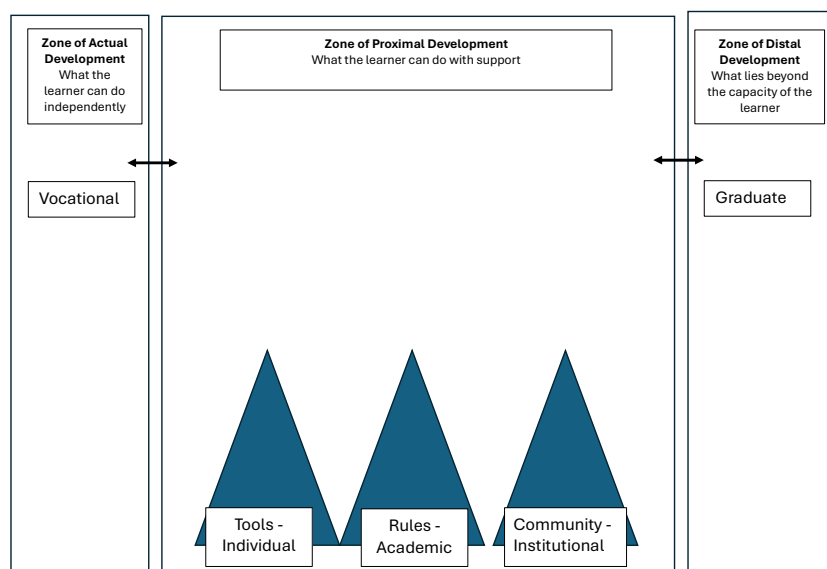


Figure 2: A Conceptual Interpretation of Tools, Rules and Community

In facilitating this transition, tools, rules and community form interconnected aspects of Vygotsky's SCT (Figure 2).² Tools, as mediators of cognitive development, encompass tangible and intangible resources such as language, cultural artefacts, and technological aids. These tools act as bridges between the learner and their environment, enabling the internalisation of knowledge and skills.² Closely intertwined with tools are rules, which refer to the norms, guidelines, and institutional policies shaping the learning environment. These rules ensure a structured process that aligns institutional expectations with learner needs, providing clarity and consistency in academic practices.² The concept of community further enriches this approach and encompasses the networks of peers, educators, mentors, and institutional support systems that collectively shape the learner's experience.² Figure 2 illustrates the way in which tools, rules, and community collectively operate within the ZPD, bridging the gap between vocational expertise and academic competence by situating the learner at the centre of a scaffolding process.

Transitioning from vocational training to higher education often requires learners to adapt to unfamiliar academic tools, rules, and community dynamics. Vygotsky's SCT, the ZPD, and the concept of scaffolding provide a theory for understanding and facilitating this adaptation.^{30,91,94} For the vocational paramedic, scaffolded interventions could bridge the gap between their established practical expertise and the demands of theoretical engagement, ensuring they are equipped to navigate and excel in the complexities of higher education.

3.6 Lens: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Scaffolding

This research is underpinned by Vygotsky's SCT, which aligns with constructivist principles emphasising the interplay of social interactions, language, and cultural contexts in the learning process.^{30,31,94} SCT provides a theoretical foundation for understanding learning as a socially mediated process, where individuals construct knowledge within a community of practice and through the guidance of More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs). Central to SCT is the ZPD, the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guided support. For vocational learners, this space reflects the transition from practice-based competence to abstract academic engagement.

By anchoring this research within Vygotsky's SCT, it is posited that vocational learners transitioning into postgraduate studies can enhance their cognitive abilities through structured support and guidance.³¹ The ZPD and the scaffolding process thus provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how targeted and adaptive support can facilitate this transition.^{30,94} Aligned with the aim and objectives of this research, Vygotsky's theory underscores the role of educational support systems in aiding learners as they navigate the challenges of integrating into postgraduate studies. This makes SCT a robust and contextually appropriate theoretical framework for examining the support needs of vocational learners entering postgraduate education through non-traditional pathways.

This research is particularly relevant to vocational learners, whose prior education and training often emphasise practical skills over theoretical knowledge and independent academic practices.⁵³ The focus on skills-based learning can leave vocational learners unprepared to navigate the demands of postgraduate studies, where critical thinking and theoretical engagement are essential. As a result, support may be crucial to ensuring that vocational learners can adapt successfully to higher education's academic requirements and expectations.²²

CHAPTER 4: A Descriptive Literature Review of Recognition of Prior Learning for Vocational Learners in Emergency Medical Care in South Africa

Declaration from author and co-authors

The following co-author contributed to the publication: Cunningham, C.

The authors' contributions were as follows:

DG and CC contributed to the conception and design of the study. DG conducted the literature analysis, drafted the manuscript, and contributed to its revision. CC contributed to the analysis and interpretation of the data and provided critical revisions to the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

The extent of each person's contributions follows:

- DG: 60%
- CC: 40%

The headings and citation numbers have been updated to align with the body of the thesis; the content remains as per publication.

Debbie Groome

10 February 2025



Charmaine Cunningham

10 February 2025



4.1 Abstract

Radical advances in emergency medical care education in South Africa have resulted in both advancements and suppression. After short-course vocational training, the emergency care provider could seek employment in an emergency service. With the realignment of emergency medical care programmes to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), these short vocational courses were phased out by 2018. Although necessary for educational advancement, these changes prevented vocationally trained emergency care providers from articulating into higher education without returning to full-time academia. Moreover, despite recognition of prior learning (RPL) policies in higher education, few institutes offering emergency medical care programmes offered this as an access option.

This descriptive literature review aimed to analyse the RPL processes in South Africa and globally. Additionally, insight into RPL candidates' support requirements for postgraduate studies was gained. A systematic search of peer-reviewed journal articles, periodicals, dissertations, and governmental reports from 2000 to 2021 was conducted. Various databases were accessed, including ProQuest, EBSCOhost, LearnTechLib, JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, and the Thesis Repository. The lack of literature focusing on the prehospital RPL system in South Africa prompted search expansions into the field of health science internationally. Of the 401 screened sources, 19 met the researcher's inclusion criteria. Two additional articles were sourced in a repeated search in February 2022.

The findings revealed enablers and barriers for RPL students and expanded on their personal and academic transitions. The themes identified through the enablers and barriers can assist in identifying additional support for RPL students during their educational journey. Ultimately, despite vital institutional transitions in RPL processes, intrinsic motivation inspired these students to embrace the challenges they faced, and their process of personal transition and lifelong learning began.

Keywords: recognition of prior learning, vocational learning, emergency medical providers, paramedic, higher education

4.2 Background

Emergency care education in South Africa has evolved rapidly over the last decade and is dynamic and continuously changing. Previously, emergency care providers could qualify as ‘vocationally trained’ through a short-course tiered system, progressing from basic to advanced life support emergency care providers.^{4,6} After successfully completing the relevant course, a certificate was issued, and one would be able to enter the prehospital emergency system as a vocationally trained emergency care provider. However, these certificate courses were not aligned with the National Qualification Framework (NQF). They were discontinued in 2018, meaning emergency care providers could no longer qualify or advance in emergency care education via vocational or short-course pathways.³⁴ Their educational journey was further halted as those who qualified in this system were unable to articulate into other qualifications as they did not meet NQF entry requirements. Table 5 details the NQF levels and current emergency medical care qualifications.

Table 5: National Qualification Framework Scale with Current Emergency Medical Care Qualifications

Sub-Framework	NQF Level	Qualification Type	Qualification
General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework	1	Grade 9	
	2	Grade 10	
		National Certificates Occupational certificates	
	3	Grade 11	
		National Certificates Level 3 Occupational Certificates	
4	Grade 12		
	National Certificates Level 4 Occupational Certificates		
5	Higher Certificate Advanced National Certificate Occupational Certificates	Higher Certificate in Emergency Medical Care (1 year)	

Sub-Framework	NQF Level	Qualification Type	Qualification
Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework	6	Diploma Advanced Certificate Occupational Certificates	Diploma in Emergency Medical Care (2 years)
	7	Degree Advanced Diploma Postgraduate Certificate	
	8	Honours Postgraduate Diploma	Bachelor's Degree in Emergency Medical Care (4 years)
	9	Masters	Master's in Emergency Medical Care
	10	Doctorate	Doctor of Philosophy in Emergency Medical Care

Vocationally trained emergency care providers are essential in the emergency medical system. Due to the diverse geographical communities within South Africa, emergency care providers are often the only providers in rural and marginalised communities. This, together with full-time employment, family responsibility, and financial challenges, prevent the emergency care provider from returning to full-time education. Since the emergency medical NQF programme required to advance the scope of practice would take four years, educational advancement is thus out of reach for most vocationally trained emergency care providers. These vocational workers were suspended at a time when education was rapidly advancing, yet theirs limited them.

4.3 RPL in South Africa

South African vocational emergency care providers have a wealth of operational experience, and many perform mentorship roles for undergraduate students. Their advancement in career and education (via tertiary education) can be recognised through recognition of prior learning (RPL). The South Africa Qualifications Association explains this concept as the principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated, and assessed for

the purposes of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development.^{8,10}

The RPL process is multi-dimensional; non-formal and informal learning are measured across different contexts and certified against credit, access, inclusion, or advancement placement within an NQF-aligned qualification.¹⁰ Through the RPL process, placement into NQF-aligned educational programmes could provide the answer vocationally trained emergency care providers have been looking for.

4.4 Educational Opportunities for Vocational Emergency Care Providers

In 2014, the University of Cape Town's Department of Surgery, Division of Emergency Medicine, applied to the Council on Higher Education to add a Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care (PGDip EC) to their offerings. It took a few years to attain the necessary permissions, additional time was required for course design, and the first course was launched in 2021. The one-year standalone programme was designed as an interdisciplinary course to equip doctors, nurses, and emergency care providers working in emergency care systems with theoretical, clinical, research and management skills that promote the development of evidence-based emergency care across the African content. Entirely online, this NQF Level 8 programme allows for distance learning while working full time. Practitioners could improve knowledge and, at the same time, develop management and research-based skills in an interdisciplinary realm. Students would develop through carefully designed courses over the year, focusing on accessing and using best practice evidence-based methods in theoretical, research, and management science.⁶⁶

The Division of Emergency Medicine offers this programme to emergency care providers, nurses, and doctors with at least a four-year degree or NQF Level 7 qualification. It also considers those who successfully completed an RPL portfolio demonstrating experience and knowledge. Through recognition of the RPL process, the vocational emergency care provider can apply for access and gain a postgraduate diploma with successful completion. This could then facilitate access to and eligibility for higher postgraduate programmes in tertiary education.

As the first offering promoting individuals' transition to a higher education qualification at NQF 8 for vocationally trained emergency care providers, the PGDip EC qualification offers many opportunities using the RPL process. The online programme overcomes the necessity of class attendance but creates new challenges in transitioning vocationally trained emergency care providers to postgraduate studies.

The rapidly evolving educational environment provides an exciting area for research. This study thus reviewed existing literature detailing the support requirements of vocationally qualified emergency care providers who have gained access to postgraduate emergency care programmes using a descriptive approach. The findings will provide a deeper understanding of RPL and offer insight into successful programmes, potential gaps, and challenges experienced by institutions and RPL participants. As there is limited knowledge about RPL and support requirements at the postgraduate level, this study contributes to the emerging knowledge base.

4.5 Design and Methods

4.5.1 Study design

A systematic, descriptive review design was used to analyse the RPL process in South Africa and globally. Insight to support RPL candidates' postgraduate studies could be gained from this review. The information sources used to conduct this literature review included peer-reviewed journal articles, periodicals, dissertations, and governmental reports. Using the University of Cape Town library portal, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, LearnTechLib, JSTOR, ERIC, Google Scholar, and the Thesis Repository were accessed.

4.5.2 Search strategy

A systematic search was conducted using the 'advanced search function' on the abovementioned databases. The following search terms were used in various combinations: 'recognition of prior learning or RPL', 'vocational or skill training or vocational education or skill-based training', 'emergency care provider or emergency medical care or emergency care', 'support needs' and 'postgraduate studies'. Further specifications of the date range from 2000 to current, and English language, were included. The review was done from July 2021 to January 2022. The lack of literature

focusing on the prehospital RPL system in South Africa prompted search expansions into the health science field. As only a few articles were found in the South African context, the search was broadened to include international studies, and a total of 401 non-duplicate articles were found.

4.5.3 Inclusions and exclusions

After reviewing the titles and abstracts, 355 articles were excluded as they did not relate to the adult learner or were irrelevant to the study. Of the 46 articles reviewed, 19 were included in this literature review. Two additional articles were excluded for repeats (Figure 3).

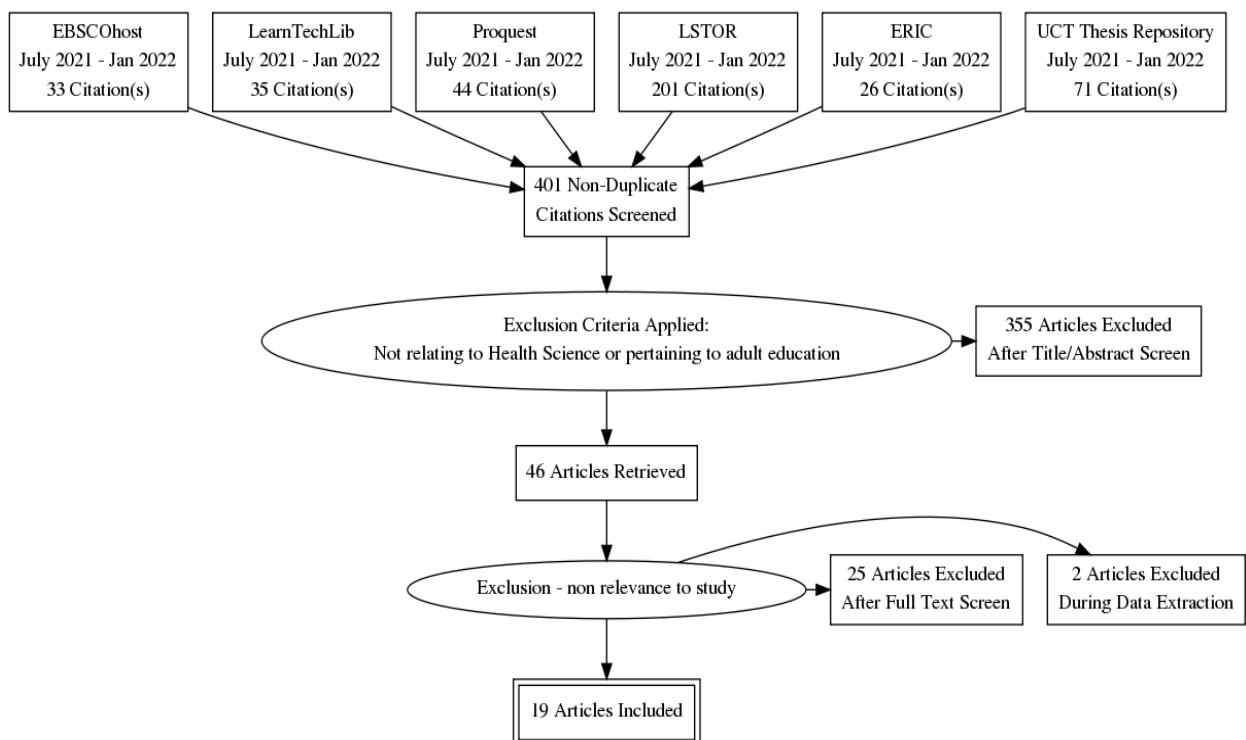


Figure 3: PRISMA flow diagram of database search and article screening¹⁹⁹

4.6 Results

This literature review aimed to explore RPL processes within South Africa and gain insight into vocational emergency care providers' support requirements when transitioning into postgraduate studies.

Of the 19 articles relating to this study's aims, four were internationally based, three were within the African continent, and 12 were from South Africa. A majority of the literature used a qualitative methodology, where one-on-one interviews expanded the journey into higher education through RPL and students' experiences while studying.

4.6.1 *Transition through recognition of prior learning*

In research exploring Malaysian postgraduates' support requirements, Abiddin and Ismail epitomised higher education by identifying the only constant as change.⁸¹ For the current study, the researcher views the South African education system, within the definition of change, as an ever-transforming system.⁹⁸ Through the dire need for transformation, the concept of RPL was expanded with the vision of facilitating educational access and developing those previously unable to advance into higher education.^{19,99} However, despite the RPL process' intentions, the execution was slow, particularly in the field of health science, with little to no focus on the prehospital context.⁹⁹ Institutional capacity was also recognised as one of the most significant challenges for the successful implementation of RPL.^{99,100}

To determine students' support requirements, barriers and enablers must be explored. Enablers in the context of this research include support structures that had a positive influence on the students' journey throughout the programme. Conversely, barriers can be considered as those that have a negative influence or effect. By exploring these two concepts, areas that promoted and impacted individuals' learning and successful transition could be identified. Support requirements should thus be investigated, enhancing those already in place, and implementing new measures in areas where support may be insufficient or completely lacking through participatory action research.

Consistent themes emerged throughout the literature and are summarised in Table 6 and then further discussed. These are divided into three themes, with subthemes of enablers and barriers.

Table 6: Themes and Subthemes Influencing Postgraduate RPL Students' Successful Transition

	Enablers	Barriers
Individual	Personal growth Personal motivation Support Structures	Personal failure Financial constraints Time restrictions
Academic	Personal experience Flexibility	Academic writing/language barriers Ability to learn Technology
Institutional	Services offered	University Culture Orientation Lack of guidance

4.6.2 Individual enablers and barriers

To quantify personal growth and transition during education is difficult due to the nature of this concept, yet this theme was repeatedly presented during the literature review.^{18,22,23,58,76,81,99–102} Through the actual RPL process, applicants experience the first concept of transition. For many, successful acceptance in the RPL process increased self-confidence and boosted self-motivation, allowing a generic feeling of achievement.^{18,81,84,99,101,102} This intrinsic motivation based on the elevation of self-worth enhances the learning experience for the RPL student; that which was not possible is now achievable.¹⁰² For the vocational learner who previously did not meet entry requirements to higher education, this process of proving self-worth and self-confidence could be internalised as the first achievement in educational progression.

Hoffman and Julie explored the academic transition process and argued that many educational transitional challenges are linked to the primary motivation for pursuing further studies.²² Self-actualisation and improvement on an existing body of knowledge were identified as the most significant intrinsic motivational factors.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, although progression in education was initially thought to promote professionalism and employability, the main effect was personal.¹⁰⁰ Academic transition was the concept feared by most students, where words such as 'fear of failure' were used during

interviews.^{42,102} This perceived and potential barrier could prevent successful progression due to the ideology of failure.

Based on the positive personal transition most students experienced when entering postgraduate studies through the RPL process, family support structures were further explored in this literature review; family and peer support was rated the most valuable.^{99,100,102} Moreover, of the social support students received, the support acquired from fellow students was identified as the most influential.^{18,52,102} A degree of commonality amongst RPL students resulted in private workgroups, increased inter-student support, and a perceived sense of belonging. The education journey can be lonesome and despairing, especially for the RPL candidate who does not carry the institutional experience. The need for acceptance is intrinsic in the social being; thus, inter-student support promotes motivation, inspiration and a positive experience.¹⁸ Hamer epitomises this concept by exploring a philosophy of recognition in RPL and human agency, concluding that '*this is a way to see and be seen*'.⁴² This emphasis on self-worth and belonging can support and motivate learning.⁴²

Financial challenges, including loss of income and concern over additional expenses, were highlighted as a significant hindrance and often resulted in the non-completion of postgraduate studies.^{18,58,103} Secondary to finances, time was identified as one of the greatest sacrifices RPL students made.²⁹ The implication of balancing study, work and family often hindered students' transition into postgraduate studies, resulting in conflicting role demands.^{52,103}

4.6.3 Academic enablers and barriers

This theme outlined the most barriers RPL students experienced. In using the RPL process to access postgraduate studies, many steps within academic growth are omitted. Together with individuals' lack of knowledge of academic protocol, it was noted that these students initially relied on emotion and personal experience to guide their writing rather than data or scientific research.⁵² Due to the pedagogical 'rote-learning' style that many vocational learners were exposed to pre-apartheid, pre-university learning fails as a foundation of critical thinking skills.³⁰ Mastering language and interpretation of meaning was another challenge experienced.^{100,104} Most South African universities use English or Afrikaans as the language of instruction, which is

not the first language of the majority of South Africans, further challenging the educational journey.²⁹ This linguo-cultural barrier compounds the stress dynamic, especially in the transition phase into higher education.^{22,52,105} The time required to learn a new vocabulary and understand departmental meaning in assessments and academic-related concepts is deemed a barrier that could articulate across the programme.

Although personal experience was considered an enabler, the downside was age and the years since studying last took place. Many students who were interviewed expressed the need to 'learn to study' again.^{29,32} This process of learning to study, the pressure for critical thinking and scientific writing, together with a new orientation to the university culture, often resulted in delays in adjusting to the learning process. It was noted the flexibility of online programmes assisted as the mature learner could engage in learning material at any time.²⁹

Asamoah identifies that effective teaching depends on rich knowledge, critical thinking, expertise in subject matter and the use of technology.⁷⁶ While the former are educational and experience requirements, technology can both hinder and support online learning. Asamoah further eludes that the advances in technology directed for higher education has been augmented with the intrinsic motivation of students presenting with a desire to learn without barriers.⁷⁶ As education transitions from traditional to the online platform, technological expertise is no longer a recommendation but a necessity. Moreover, at the postgraduate level, the assumption of technological competence exists. This assumption is based on the premise that students advance from undergraduate to postgraduate studies, and technological knowledge expands during this journey. However, the RPL candidate entering the postgraduate level may not have experienced the necessity to grow in the technological domain and therefore faces an additional challenge in his journey of learning.⁷⁶

Moreover, to access the learner management systems used by universities, an electronic device that supports internet connectivity is required. Although almost every student owns a smartphone, the size of the screen does not allow for effective reading, completion of assessments or generic course-related scholarly events This can

become a costly addition to study material, especially when specialised platforms, applications or systems are required. In addition, despite the flexibility of online studying, the national and global energy crisis results in unreliable electricity supply and internet inconsistencies, which delay scheduled study sessions.^{22,76}

4.6.4 Institutional enablers and barriers

A common theme among students who had never attended university was a lack of orientation to the institutional culture.^{24,58,76,103,106,107} Orientation ranged from gaining an understanding of lines of communication within the university and the department responsible for the programme, exploring additional services offered, and generic movement from registration to admission, and then the learning system used. Brenner similarly suggests that a link between the RPL students' unfamiliarity with university processes and lack of cultural capital may be a barrier and delay transition.²³ The natural causal sequence thus requires additional interrogation, delaying the rapid adaption required in terms of workload, schedules and performance.²⁴

Each higher education institution comprises interdepartmental components that aid the student's journey. One would start with registration, and progress through finance and logistics to the specific programme-related teaching divisions. Roles are clearly defined among registrars, educators and tutors, and most learning management systems clearly display the relevant persons to approach when support is required. Yet this multi-layered staff organogram conflicts with many emergency medical care vocational courses. In these, one or two educators play multiple roles in terms of administration, education, and generic go-to-person for almost all course-related issues. In the reviewed literature, vocationally taught students thus expressed confusion in understanding this interdepartmental approach and tended to contact the programme manager for most issues.^{24,55,103} As this often requires a query redirection, time frustrations can be perceived as a lack of support or guidance.^{58,103}

Despite this, most higher education institutions have multiple support centres to aid students' transition and educational journey, but minimal references to these departments were found in the reviewed literature. As many barriers and frustrations were voiced by RPL students, it can be assumed that these were underutilised, although the reasons for this should be further explored.

4.7 RPL Students' Transition

To grasp the transition process, one must be cognizant of both the academic and personal journey undertaken by the RPL student. Through intrinsic motivation, these RPL students have held onto a dream of purpose. Dykes claims if prior knowledge and learning are devalued and disregarded, their importance is negated.²¹ By suppressing this knowledge, the student's transformation towards lifelong learning is silenced.²¹

When entering a postgraduate programme, the goal is graduation and certification, but the journey to this point necessitates change. While the primary expectation of change entails student transition, the need for quality education has warranted a reform of higher education.⁸¹ The varied backgrounds of the mature RPL students add a unique and unequalled experience to each programme, and it is this experience that higher education facilities should harness in further developing RPL policies.

4.8 Conclusion

Despite a floundering start, the conception of RPL is gaining momentum in higher Education in South Africa, and slowly spreading throughout Africa. To disregard vocational learners' wealth of knowledge is deleterious and would cement the future of the mature student. Equally, to advance the vocational learner infers an understanding of their requirements and support needs.

After evaluating the enablers and barriers in the literature reviewed for this study, multiple themes were identified. These were categorised into subthemes based on individual, academic and institutional enablers and barriers. To accurately determine RPL students' support requirements, an understanding of their challenges and support areas is vital. Although many enablers were identified, there are multiple areas where support requirements can be actioned for improved transition. It is of interest to note that despite barriers' potential negative impact, many students embrace these as opportunities and, on reflection, realise that the barriers became enablers through their

personal transition during their studies. It is in this growth process where true transition occurs.

4.9 Discussion of Section 1

The word 'success' is used in this study to encapsulate key outcomes for the vocational learner: successful transition, successful progression, and successful acceptance. Success is defined as "the accomplishment of an aim or purpose".⁹⁸ To quantify 'success' within the context of this research, this study draws on literature where success in transitioning to higher education involves academic achievement and adaptation to institutional norms. The literature further frames success as a combination of personal growth, effective integration, and resilience in overcoming barriers.^{18,22,58,108}

Vygotsky's SCT underpins this conceptualisation by suggesting that success is mediated through tools, rules, community, and structured support, enabling learners to bridge gaps in knowledge and skill to achieve positive outcomes (Figure 1) The word 'success' is used in this study to encapsulate key outcomes for the vocational learner: successful transition, successful progression, and successful acceptance. Success is defined as "the accomplishment of an aim or purpose".⁹⁸ To quantify 'success' within the context of this research, this study draws on literature where success in transitioning to higher education involves academic achievement and adaptation to institutional norms. The literature further frames success as a combination of personal growth, effective integration, and resilience in overcoming barriers.^{18,22,58,108}

Vygotsky's SCT underpins this conceptualisation by suggesting that success is mediated through tools, rules, community, and structured support, enabling learners to bridge gaps in knowledge and skill to achieve positive outcomes (Figure 1).² These perspectives validate the broad definition of success as applied in this study.

The barriers and enablers vocational learners face when transitioning into higher education ultimately play a role in these learners' success. Integrated within the enablers and barriers are tools, rules, and community.² Tools, including tangible

resources such as technology and intangible assets like language and prior knowledge, mediate learning, enabling learners to connect their vocational expertise with the demands of academic study.^{2,12} Rules, reflected in institutional policies and academic frameworks, provide necessary structure and consistency but can also create barriers when misaligned with vocational learners' diverse backgrounds.^{2,13,84} Community, comprising networks of peers, mentors, and institutional support systems, offers critical guidance and emotional reinforcement, acknowledging the learner as a social being.^{2,16,102} Together, these interconnected elements influence how vocational learners navigate and overcome the challenges of higher education.

In this descriptive literature review, RPL emerged as an important tool, facilitating individuals' access by validating non-formal and informal learning, addressing historical inequities, and enabling vocational learners to enter advanced academic pathways.^{99,110} However, access alone does not guarantee success. Overcoming barriers in academic preparedness, institutional navigation, and theoretical engagement requires comprehensive and well-structured support systems providing scaffolding that can help vocational learners to thrive in academic environments.^{24,55,100}

SECTION 2

Mixed Methodology Studies

Four interconnected studies (Chapters 7-9) in this section explore the lived experiences of RPL candidates enrolled in the PGDip EC programme. The section also provides an overarching discussion of ethical considerations, detailing the principles applied throughout the research process, measures taken to address biases, and insights drawn from a reflexive journal.

CHAPTER 5: Research Design

This chapter outlines the research design for this study and explains how the chosen methods, informed by the social constructivist orientation of Vygotsky's SCT and the collaborative focus of PAR, align with the objectives of the research and the aim of developing a conceptual framework of support for vocational paramedics transitioning into postgraduate study through RPL.

A key consideration during the research design was learners as a vulnerable population, and RPL candidates may be considered even more vulnerable because of the potential challenges or assumptions linked to their academic preparation and transition into postgraduate study. There was also a design consideration that the vocational learners should not feel singled out or disadvantaged during the research. Thus, during the design of the four studies, these aspects were considered. These considerations are discussed here, and specific details regarding different methodologies are presented within each study.

At a broader level, the nature of the research questions shaped the methodological approach. This study was concerned with understanding how vocational learners experience and navigate academic systems, and the support they may require to do this successfully. Such a question is inherently exploratory, aligning with the view of knowledge as being co-constructed and situated within lived experience. From this social constructivist position, meaning is generated through interaction, dialogue, and shared interpretation, making the voices of learners an essential component of the inquiry. As a result, PAR provided a methodological orientation that could engage with the complexity of these experiences, while the indirect approach balanced the need for learner voice with the ethical responsibility to avoid overburdening a vulnerable group.

5.1 Research Design

The investigation was divided into four interconnected studies (Table 1) to meet the primary study’s aims and objectives. Many of these contained sub-studies, and as PAR was used, they built upon the findings of the previous one, creating a progressive and iterative research process. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research questions, with the studies conducted from 2021 to 2024. Figure 4 represents a chronological timeline of all four studies conducted in this research

The findings from studies one, two, and three collectively informed study four (figure 5), which resulted in the development of a conceptual framework of support for vocational paramedics transitioning to postgraduate studies (Chapter 15).

Research timelines	2021												2022												2023												2024											
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Study 1 - Descriptive literature review																																																
Literature review																																																
Literature analysis and write up																																																
Study 2 - Mixed Methods																																																
HMLSQ																																																
Descriptive analysis of academic performance metrics																																																
Semi-structured interview (RPL candidates)																																																
Study 3 - PAR Cycles																																																
PAR cycle 1																																																
PAR cycle 2																																																
PAR cycle 3																																																
Study 4 - Framework development																																																
Framework development																																																

Figure 4: Chronological Timeline of Studies Conducted in the Research

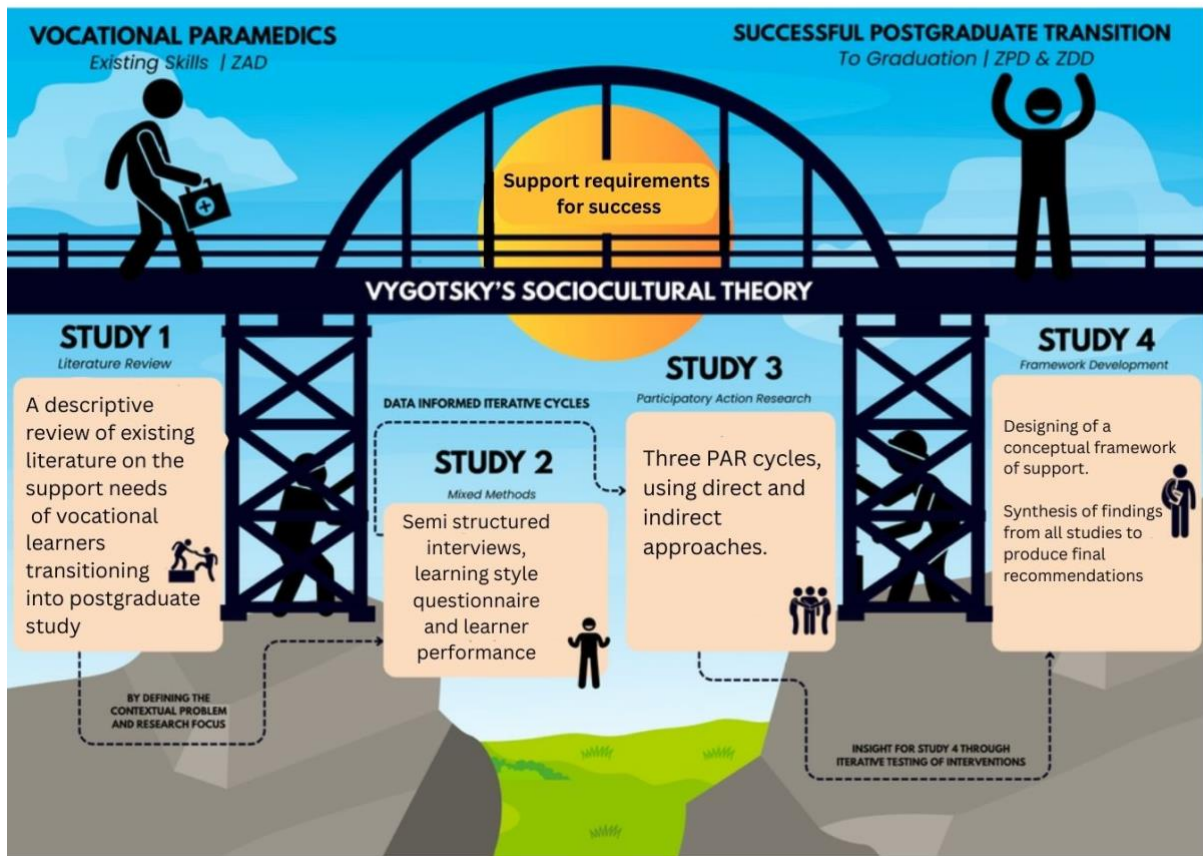


Figure 5: Infographic of Research Design

5.1.1 Study 1

Study 1 (Chapter 4) addressed the first objective and employed a descriptive literature review to explore the enablers, barriers, and challenges vocational learners faced in transitioning to postgraduate education. This foundational study established the theoretical framework underpinning subsequent investigations and was therefore discussed earlier in this research. Full details of the literature collection process, analysis, and identification of themes are presented in Chapter 4.

5.1.2 Study 2

Study 2 (Chapters 7, 8 and 9) was designed to address the second research objective, which focused on understanding how vocational learners adapt to postgraduate study and what support mechanisms facilitate their progression. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, this study sought to identify learning styles, explore academic experiences, and generate evidence to inform the conceptual framework for supporting RPL candidates.

A sequential multi-method design was employed as follows:

1. An analysis of the 2021 and 2022 cohort annual marks (for all courses on the programme),
2. An assessment using the HMLSQ,
3. Semi-structured interviews with RPL candidates

This multi-method approach was selected to capture both measurable academic performance and the lived experiences of RPL candidates. Quantitative data, such as the final grades of the cohort and HMLSQ results, provided descriptive insights into learning styles and academic achievement, while qualitative interviews offered depth and context to these findings. Integrating both strands allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the support needs and learning trajectories of vocational learners.

Study 2 was conducted within the PGDip EC programme at UCT, which comprises a mixed cohort of RPL and traditionally admitted students. No distinction was made between the different groups in the cohort. Data collection took place across the 2021 and 2022 academic years (see tables 8 and 9).

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from UCT, and is further detailed in chapters 6, and 8,7,

5.1.3 Study 3

Study 3 (Chapters 10–14) addressed the third research objective, which was to evaluate the progression of RPL candidates during their postgraduate studies. This study employed three iterative cycles of PAR, which ultimately informed the development of a support framework for vocational paramedics transitioning into postgraduate study through RPL for access (figure 6). Given that learners were considered a vulnerable population, with RPL candidates assumed to be more so due to their non-traditional academic backgrounds, an indirect approach to PAR was adopted in the first two cycles. This approach engaged the programme convenor and tutors as co-researchers to reflect on and respond to learner experiences, allowing the learners to focus on their studies without additional pressure.

This approach aligns with emerging recognition of indirect participation in PAR, where institutional actors reflect and act on behalf of learner groups.^{155,157} Such methods are increasingly validated in educational contexts where learners are constrained in their capacity to engage directly.¹⁴⁶ Mertler affirms that educators, administrators, or academic staff may be well-positioned to act as co-researchers in the PAR process, particularly when embedded in the learning environment and able to drive iterative improvements.¹⁵⁹ This adaptation maintains the integrity of the reflective cycle central to PAR while upholding ethical standards and safeguarding participant well-being.^{160,161}

In the third PAR cycle, learner perspectives were incorporated more directly through reflective questionnaires and feedback. Further details of each PAR cycle, including data collection, analysis, and findings, are presented in the corresponding PAR chapters.

Study 3 spanned two years (2022 and 2023 (see figure x)) and was conducted using PAR (Chapters 10-14). Three cycles of PAR were conducted:

1. Cycle one expanded the tutor group in 2022 (Chapter 12).
2. Cycle two developed a Tutor Student Charter for boundary setting (Chapter 13).

This process included:

- a. facilitation of a focus group discussion with the tutor group (Chapter 13.11)
- b. content analysis of the discussion to identify key themes, which led to the development of the Tutor–Student Charter; (Chapter 13.11).
- c. use of a safety cross to follow tutor-learner communication over a three-month period (Chapter 13.9.1).
- d. comparison of the safety cross results with the PGDip EC timetable, and the availability commitments outlined in the Tutor Student Charter (Chapter 13.9.1.1)
- e. distribution of three questionnaires to the tutors, one per month, over a three-month period (Chapter 13.9.2).
- f. content analysis of the feedback from the questionnaires (Chapter 13.9.2)

3. Cycle three explored support and progression of learners through two questionnaires: analysis
 - a. administration of a questionnaire to the 2023 PGDip EC cohort, focusing on their engagement with university support services during the academic year (Chapter 14.3)
 - b. administration of a questionnaire to graduates from the 2022 PGDip EC cohort to determine whether they had enrolled in further qualifications post-graduation (Chapter 14.4.1).
 - c. content analysis of the responses from both questionnaires (Chapter 14.7)

Study 3 - PAR cycles		J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
		a	e	a	p	a	u	u	u	e	c	v	c	e	a	p	a	u	u	u	e	c	v	c
		2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
		2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
PAR CYCLE 1 - TUTOR GROUP																								
Invite to 2021 graduates (Department)																								
Orientation of new tutors																								
Implementation of Tutors																								
PAR CYCLE 2 - TUTOR STUDENT CHARTER																								
Tutor group discussion and analysis																								
Development of Tutor Student Charter																								
Implementation of Tutor Student Charter																								
Questionnaire - follow up of Tutor Student Charter																								
Safety cross - communication reporting																								
PAR CYCLE 3 - ENHANCING STUDENT SUPPORT FRAMEWORK																								
2023 PGDip EC learner questionnaire																								
2022 PGDip EC graduate questionnaire																								
2022 PGDip EC graduate questionnaire																								
Analysis of data																								

Figure 6: Chronological Overview of PAR Cycles and Associated Tasks

5.1.4 Study 4

Study 4 (Chapter 15) synthesised the findings from the previous studies to form a conceptual framework of support for vocational paramedics transitioning to postgraduate studies, the fourth objective. This framework incorporates theoretical insights with practical integration to provide a structured and adaptable approach to addressing the challenges vocational paramedics encounter.

5.2 Timelines

The timelines for the research were sequential, with each phase building on the findings of the previous one; this sequence is depicted in Figures 4,5 and 6.

5.3 Sample Size

The initial research design exclusively focused on RPL candidates within the PGDip EC programme. However, the scope was later broadened to include all learners enrolled in the PGDip EC programme between 2021 and 2023 to avoid isolating this vulnerable population (Table 8). This adjustment allowed for descriptive analysis between RPL and non-RPL candidates, offering a more inclusive and balanced exploration of their experiences while safeguarding the well-being of the RPL group.

To contextualise the sample size, Table 7 presents the applications and admissions to the PGDip EC programme for 2021 and 2022, distinguishing between RPL and non-RPL candidates. In 2021, there were 98 applications, of which 53 through the RPL route and 45 were non-RPL. Ten RPL applicants were admitted (18.9 percent), alongside 13 non-RPL applicants (28.9 percent). In 2022, applications increased to 139, with 81 RPL and 58 non-RPL candidates. Of these, 21 RPL applicants were admitted (29.6 percent) and nine non-RPL applicants (13.2 percent). In 2023, applications rose further to 179, with 103 submitted through the RPL route and 76 via the non-RPL route. Eighteen RPL applicants were admitted (24 percent), while 29 non-RPL applicants gained admission (28.2 percent). Taken together, these figures indicate that across the three years, more than half of the total applications were submitted through the RPL route, suggesting the potential for vocational paramedics to seek advancement in higher education and positioning this pathway as an important mechanism for expanding access.

Table 7: Applications and Admissions to the PGDip EC (2021-2023)

	Total Applications	RPL Applications	Non-RPL Applications	RPL Admitted (Rate)	Non-RPL Admitted (Rate)
2021	98	53	45	10 (18.9%)	13 (28.9%)
2022	139	81	8	21 (29.6%)	9 (13.2%)
2023	179	76	103	18 (24%)	29 (28.16%)

As the PAR cycles followed an indirect approach, the specific participants involved in each cycle are described in detail within the respective sections and is detailed in table 8.

Table 8: Inclusion, Sample Size and Participants per Study

	Study	Inclusion	Sample Size	Participants
Study 2	HMLSQ (presented as a quiz in the first PGDip Course)	All 2021 PGDip EC learners	24	24
		All 2022 PGDip EC learners	35	35
	Interviews with RPL candidates	All 2021 RPL candidates	11	10 (One unable to participate due to work constraints)
Study 3	Cycle 1 Invitation to join a tutor group	All 2021 PGDip EC learners	24	4
		Tutors	6	6
	Cycle 2 Development of Tutor Student Charter	Tutors	6	6
Cycle 3	2023 PGDip EC cohort feedback questionnaire	All 2023 PGDip EC learners	27	29
	2022 PGDip EC graduate feedback questionnaire	All 2022 PGDip EC learners (now graduates)	35	14

CHAPTER 6: Ethical Concerns and Considerations

6.1 Vulnerable Population

Learners are widely regarded as a vulnerable population within educational research, which necessitates heightened ethical consideration to safeguard their well-being.¹¹¹ This is especially relevant when research involves learners who are in transition, such as those entering higher education through RPL. Within this study, the decision to exclude RPL candidates from the core design process was informed by their heightened vulnerability as learners who had never previously engaged with higher education. They were perceived by the research team as potentially vulnerable due to the perceived academic and institutional adjustments required of them. Recognising the potential for added stress or disruption to their learning journey, measures were implemented to ensure that participation did not negatively impact their academic experience or well-being. Care was taken to prevent any perception of coercion, punishment for non-participation, or discrimination, and to ensure that participants were not singled out within the classroom as the cohort under study, thereby protecting the integrity of the research and the rights of the participants.¹⁰

Although RPL candidates were involved in the research, they were not the primary contributors to the design of the PAR cycles. Their engagement was limited to interviews and questionnaires sent at strategic times, such as semester break, which ensured that whilst the research remained embedded in their lived experience, they were able to focus on their studies rather than the research. This selective involvement reflected a deliberate methodological choice, shaped by the time-intensive nature of participatory design and a commitment to ethical practice.

The researcher employed the following strategies to protect participants:

1. **Timing of Interviews:** All interviews with RPL candidates were conducted after the participants completed assessments in their courses to avoid interfering with learning times or academic opportunities. This timing ensured that

participants could fully engage in the research process without compromising their focus on coursework or academic performance.

2. **Voluntary Participation:** Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, with no pressure or obligation to take part. Clear information about the purpose and scope of the research was provided to all participants, who were free to withdraw from the study before the analysis stage. Since the results from the questionnaire that was sent to learners were anonymised, individual responses could not be identified or withdrawn once submitted.
3. **Non-Interference with Educational Experience:** The PAR cycles used in Study 3 (Chapters 12, 13 and 14) were purposefully designed to avoid interfering with the educational experience of any learners, including RPL candidates. For example, these cycles included tutors rather than learners, ensuring that the research activities did not disrupt the learners' academic journey.
4. To avoid overburdening this cohort, the action research cycles were developed and refined primarily through the involvement of institutional stakeholders, such as tutors and academic staff.^{10,11,130}

6.2 Trustworthiness

To ensure the findings are trustworthy, the qualitative research studies were designed with attention to the four established criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.¹¹¹⁻¹¹⁵

6.2.1 Credibility

The studies were designed to triangulate each other and build on the body of work in this research (Figure 7) to make sure the research findings are credible. The methods employed in studies one and two included questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and data analysis. These approaches are well-recognised and widely established in research designs.¹¹² These three methods were used for method and data triangulation, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.¹¹¹⁻¹¹⁵

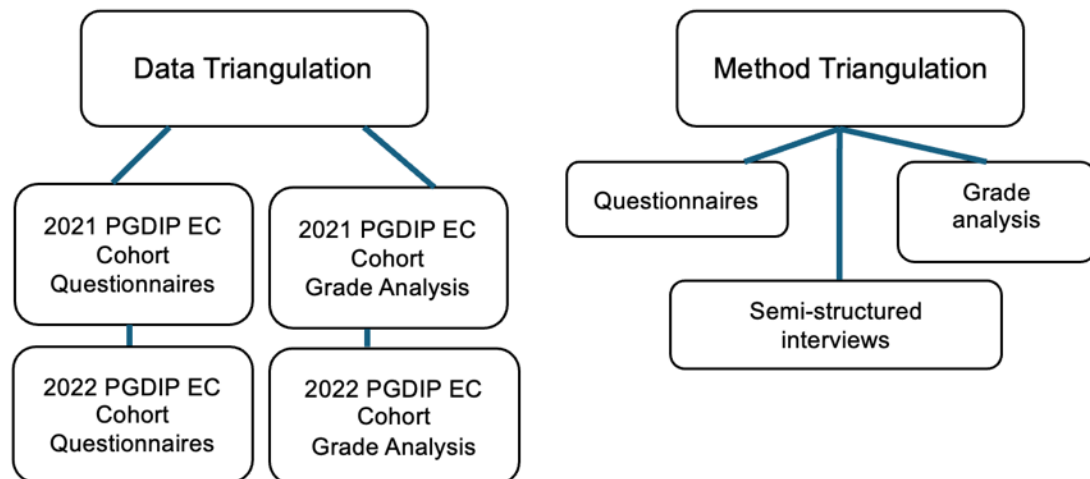


Figure 7: Triangulation Used Within this Research

6.2.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the way in which findings can be applied to other contexts or settings.¹¹⁴ This was achieved through thick descriptions of the research context, participants, methodologies, and data collection processes.^{111,112} Guba emphasises that rich, detailed, contextual information enables others to assess the applicability of the research outcomes.^{111-113,115} Unlike generalisation, which aims to apply findings universally across diverse populations, transferability allows readers to determine whether the findings are relevant to their specific contexts.¹¹¹ While the sample size and specific context of this study may not support generalisation, its emphasis on detailed, context-rich descriptions ensures that the findings are meaningful and valuable to educators and researchers working in similar environments.

6.2.3 Dependability

Dependability was ensured by maintaining a transparent and systematic approach throughout the study.¹¹¹ This involved keeping detailed records of the research path to establish a comprehensive audit trail. A reflexive journal, as discussed in subheading 6.5, was an integral part of this process, enabling the researcher to document their personal insights and evaluate the impact of their positionality on the study.¹¹³⁻¹¹⁵

6.2.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the findings are shaped by the data rather than by the researcher's biases, motivations, or perspectives.¹¹¹ In this study, confirmability was supported through several strategies. An audit trail was maintained to provide transparency in the decision-making process and to document the progression of the research. Reflexive journaling was undertaken throughout to acknowledge and critically reflect on the researcher's own assumptions and potential influence on the study.^{116,117} In addition, a research assistant independently coded the qualitative data, with any discrepancies between the researcher's and assistant's analyses reviewed collaboratively. This process ensured that the findings remained anchored in the data and not in subjective interpretations.

6.3 Bias

6.3.1 The researcher

During the proposal phase of the research process, the researcher served as a tutor for the 2021 PGDip EC programme, and the potential for power imbalances and unintentional biases due to this dual role was recognised. To address these concerns, the researcher withdrew from their tutoring role before submitting the research proposal. Additionally, the following measures were implemented to safeguard ethical standards and minimise potential bias:

1. The researcher was not involved in teaching, assessing or grading the PGDip EC learners' work.
2. Access to learner information was limited strictly to research-related tasks and was only permitted once permissions were obtained.
3. Triangulation methods were used to reduce personal bias. An external research assistant was tasked with analysing the data independently to enhance objectivity, ensuring findings were collaboratively and independently validated.
4. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in a manner free from coercion. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised to ensure that candidates did not feel obligated to participate and could withdraw until data analysis occurred. Detailed information about the research objectives and

procedures was provided, enabling participants to make informed decisions regarding their participation.

6.3.2 Primary supervisor

The research supervisor is employed within UCT's Division of Emergency Medicine, where the research was conducted. Furthermore, they serve as programme convener for the PGDip EC. This presented ethical challenges, and the research was purposefully designed to reduce the impact. The following measures were thus implemented to address these concerns and ensure objectivity and participant comfort:

1. **Separation of Roles:** The primary supervisor was excluded from any involvement in interviews or direct interactions with participants during the data collection process. The researcher sent all information letters requesting participation in the research. This ensured that participants could freely express their experiences without fear of judgement or academic repercussions.
2. **External Oversight:** A research assistant confirmed the data analysis findings, mitigating potential bias in data interpretation. This independent oversight ensured objectivity and reinforced that the conclusions were grounded in the data.¹¹⁹
3. **Dissemination of Findings:** Continuous feedback was provided to the Division of Emergency Medicine throughout the research process. Preliminary findings were shared to inform and enhance ongoing support structures for PGDip EC learners. This approach ensured that the study's insights were applied in real time.

6.4 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the UCT's Health Research Ethics Committee:

1. Study 1 - HREC 012/2022 (Appendix 1)
2. Study 2 - HREC 041/2022 (Appendix 2)
3. Study 3 - HREC 042/2022) (Appendix 3)

Permission was also granted by the Department of Student Affairs at UCT to access learners (Appendix 4).

6.5 Reflexive Journal

Reflexive journaling is integral to qualitative research, particularly in fields such as education, sociology, and health sciences.¹¹⁶⁻¹¹⁸ This methodological practice enhances the trustworthiness of research by encouraging transparency about the researcher's embedded role within the study.¹¹⁶⁻¹¹⁸ By documenting their thoughts, decisions, and biases, researchers provide a clear audit trail of their influence on the research, fostering credibility and accountability.¹¹⁸ Reflexivity acknowledges that the researcher is an active participant shaping the research process rather than a detached observer. This practice enables researchers to examine their perspectives and biases, ensuring these do not overshadow the study. By engaging in reflexivity, the researcher maintained a balance

6.5.1 *Researcher's reflexive journal extract*

The researcher maintained a reflexive journal during the study, with the following section presenting an extract from these reflections.

The origins of my research interest lie in my early experiences as a learner in emergency medical care studies at NQF Level 6. During this time, I was influenced by the mentorship I received from vocational paramedics. These individuals were not just mentors but emergency care providers whose expertise and guidance shaped my skills and understanding of the field. Their dedication to their craft and ability to balance

teaching with real-world practice inspired my desire to contribute meaningfully to the field of paramedicine.

However, I observed a stark divergence as I advanced my academic journey. While I was able to pursue higher education and broaden my professional horizons, many of my mentors faced personal and systemic constraints that hindered their ability to do the same. These constraints created barriers that prevented them from engaging with the evolving educational landscape. Today, as I near the completion of this journey, many of my mentors continue to serve as vocational paramedics. This realisation became the foundation for my research, shaping the central questions and methodological choices that guided the study.

My entry into education as an educator revealed the multifaceted challenges learners face in their academic journeys. For over a decade, I worked with learners from diverse backgrounds, observing their varying support needs and barriers to progression. As a programme coordinator, I became immersed in the realities of each learner's life, gaining a deeper understanding of how educational privileges I had taken for granted were inaccessible to many. Listening to their life stories highlighted the systemic inequities that shaped their experiences. Guided by the motto of "*changing education one learner at a time*", I aimed to make meaningful differences in their lives. Yet, I often felt my efforts were insufficient, as older learners struggled to advance while new entrants seamlessly entered the emergency care field. This lingering sense of inadequacy drove me toward research, seeking deeper insights and systemic solutions to bridge these gaps.

6.5.1.1 Navigating bias and dual roles

To learn about the programme, I intended to use as a setting for this research, I initially assisted as a quality reviewer during the design of the PGDip EC, and later served as a tutor for the first intake in 2021. However, after completing the first two courses and gaining approvals for this research, I recognised the potential for my biases as both a tutor and researcher to influence the research outcomes. This was further highlighted during the review by the divisional ethical committee. I thus withdrew from the tutoring role to mitigate this challenge. Although I was familiar with many of the RPL candidates, my interactions with them were deliberately limited to contact sessions

specifically conducted for the research to maintain professional boundaries and avoid undue influence or bias.

Balancing familiarity with impartiality presented challenges, and I consciously had to navigate my connection to the programme and the RPL participants to ensure their narratives were represented authentically. This process required careful attention to the power dynamics between me as a researcher and the participants, ensuring that their voices remained at the centre of the study. Adopting participatory action and constructivist approaches enabled ongoing engagement with the RPL candidates, allowing their stories and experiences to actively shape the research. These approaches recognise the power dynamics and position participants as co-creators of knowledge.¹¹⁷ By prioritising their experiences, I was able to mitigate the influence of my own biases and foster a collaborative and ethical research process that honoured the authenticity of their contributions.

Although I struggled to ground my research in the early stages, it became clear that I was employing a constructivist approach as I progressed, which emphasises that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants.⁸¹ This understanding resonated with Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD, which describes the space where learning occurs through guided interaction and support.⁴⁰ Recognising the parallels between my own intellectual journey and the theory of the ZPD, I began to see how my research process mirrored this model. Just as learners in the ZPD rely on the scaffolding provided by MKOs to progress, I, too, found myself advancing through the learning process with the guidance and support of my supervisor. The iterative nature of reflexivity and the PAR methodology provided a structure for my growth as a researcher within this developmental zone. By embracing this theory, I could appreciate how my study's collaborative and interactive elements contributed to the research outcomes and my own learning trajectory.⁸³

6.5.1.2 Participants' stories: Voices of resilience and vulnerability

To learn about the programme, I intended to use as a setting for this research, I initially assisted as a quality reviewer during the design of the PGDip EC, and later served as a tutor for the first intake in 2021. However, after completing the first two courses and gaining approvals for this research, I recognised the potential for my biases as both a tutor and researcher to influence the research outcomes. This was further highlighted during the review by the divisional ethical committee. I thus withdrew from the tutoring role to mitigate this challenge. Although I was familiar with many of the RPL candidates, my interactions with them were deliberately limited to contact sessions specifically conducted for the research to maintain professional boundaries and avoid undue influence or bias.

Balancing familiarity with impartiality presented challenges, and I consciously had to navigate my connection to the programme and the RPL participants to ensure their narratives were represented authentically. This process required careful attention to the power dynamics between me as a researcher and the participants, ensuring that their voices remained at the centre of the study. Adopting participatory action and constructivist approaches enabled ongoing engagement with the RPL candidates, allowing their stories and experiences to actively shape the research. These approaches recognise the power dynamics and position participants as co-creators of knowledge.¹¹⁷ By prioritising their experiences, I was able to mitigate the influence of my own biases and foster a collaborative and ethical research process that honoured the authenticity of their contributions.

Although I struggled to ground my research in the early stages, it became clear that I was employing a constructivist approach as I progressed, which emphasises that knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants.⁸¹ This understanding resonated with Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD, which describes the space where learning occurs through guided interaction and support.⁴⁰ Recognising the parallels between my own intellectual journey and the theory of the ZPD, I began to see how my research process mirrored this model. Just as learners in the ZPD rely on the scaffolding provided by MKOs to progress, I, too, found myself advancing through the learning process with the guidance and support

of my supervisor. The iterative nature of reflexivity and the PAR methodology provided a structure for my growth as a researcher within this developmental zone. By embracing this theory, I could appreciate how my study's collaborative and interactive elements contributed to the research outcomes and my own learning trajectory.⁸³

CHAPTER 7: Honey and Mumford Learning Styles

7.1 Introduction

Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles theory, developed in the 1980s by Peter Honey and Alan Mumford, builds upon David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which describes learning as a cyclical process involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation.^{28,119} Kolb argued that effective learning occurs when individuals move through each stage.¹¹⁹ Honey and Mumford adapted this concept, recognising that while learners may engage with all stages, they often exhibit a preference for a particular starting point or dominant learning style.²⁸ For instance, Activists align with Kolb's active experimentation, while Reflectors correspond to reflective observation. Honey and Mumford reframed Kolb's cyclical model into a typology of preferences, highlighting that individuals tend not to move through the stages sequentially but rather approach learning from their preferred style.^{28,119}

Honey and Mumford refined Kolb's model to better fit the needs of adult learners by focusing more on how learning styles can be applied in practical settings.²⁸ Their goal was to create a framework that could be implemented in workplace training programmes and academic settings.²⁸ The HMLSQ emerged as a tool for assessing individuals' learning preferences. This 80-item self-reported questionnaire categorises learners into four distinct styles: Activist, Reflector, Theorist, and Pragmatist (Appendix 5).^{28,120}

The HMLSQ serves two key purposes: it helps learners identify their dominant learning styles, enabling them to engage more effectively with learning content, and it provides educators with insights to customise course designs and learning activities.^{26,28,120} In the context of this research, the focus was on the learner-facing function of the tool; specifically, its potential to support students in understanding how they learn and engaging more effectively with academic content.

7.2 Overview of Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles

Honey and Mumford's model categorise learners into four distinct styles, though many individuals may demonstrate a blend of preferences or favour two styles equally.

Activists: These learners are enthusiastic about new experiences and tend to learn by doing. They are open-minded and enjoy challenges, often engaging fully in new activities. Activists prefer environments that offer dynamic, hands-on opportunities to experiment and participate in tasks.²⁸

Reflectors: Reflectors learn best by observing others and reflecting on experiences before drawing conclusions. They prefer to gather data and think deeply before making decisions or taking action. Reflectors are more inclined to take a step back to consider all possible perspectives before engaging in learning activities.²⁸

Theorists: Theorists approach learning through logical reasoning and prefer to understand the underlying concepts and principles behind any activity. They tend to organise their thoughts systematically and appreciate well-structured and concise information. Theorists thrive in environments where ideas can be examined, compared, and explored in depth.²⁸

Pragmatists: Pragmatists learn by applying ideas to practical situations. They prefer experimenting with new concepts to see how they work in the real world. Pragmatists are results-oriented and value learning that has clear, practical outcomes. They are often eager to apply new knowledge immediately in relevant, real-life scenarios.²⁸

7.3 Application and Use

The HMLSQ has been applied in numerous academic and professional contexts to help learners understand and reflect on their learning preferences. It has been used in healthcare education programmes such as nursing and medical laboratories, as well as in fields like business management and financial management, to support the alignment of teaching strategies with learner preferences.^{25,121} In these contexts, it can contribute to improved learner self-awareness and communication with educators,

which in turn enhances engagement and facilitates more effective learning environments.^{27,122}

Awareness of their learning preferences enables learners to adopt study strategies suited to their cognitive tendencies.²⁸ This self-awareness can improve academic outcomes by promoting retention and understanding, while also helping learners communicate their needs more effectively and fostering independent study habits^{81,123} Such reflection is particularly beneficial for mature learners and those entering academic settings from vocational backgrounds, who may rely more heavily on structured self-reflection to navigate academic demands.¹²⁴⁻¹²⁶

Despite its widespread use, the HMLSQ remains contested in the literature. While some studies suggest that it enhances learner engagement and reflective capacity, others challenge its validity and caution against using it to prescribe teaching methods.¹²⁴ Critics argue that matching instruction to preferred styles has not been conclusively shown to improve outcomes and that such practices risk reinforcing fixed learner identities.^{125,127,128} Nonetheless, when used as an informative or developmental tool rather than a diagnostic measure, the HMLSQ can still play a role in cultivating self-awareness and empowering students to take greater ownership of their learning processes.^{122-125,127}

While a number of other learning style instruments exist, including Kolb's Learning Style Inventory and the VARK questionnaire, the HMLSQ was selected for its practical utility and accessibility within adult and vocational education contexts.^{85,120,128} Unlike some alternatives that require extensive facilitation or technical interpretation, the HMLSQ is quick to administer, self-reported, and framed in language that is easily understood by learners unfamiliar with academic theory.^{28,121} Its categorisation into four distinct styles offers a structured yet intuitive framework through which learners can reflect on their patterns of engagement.²⁸ It is assumed that this clarity could be particularly important for vocational learners entering higher education, as many have limited prior exposure to formal academic reflection tools. The HMLSQ's emphasis on practical, observable learning behaviours aligns well with the experiential knowledge base typical of vocational learners, which makes it a possible tool for supporting their transition into academic environments.^{26,}

7.4 Rationale for HMLSQ Use in this Study

The HMLSQ was introduced into the first course of the PGDip EC, titled “Introduction to Postgraduate Studies”, by the course designers. Introduction to Postgraduate Studies focused on equipping students with the foundational skill set required for success in postgraduate education. The rationale behind incorporating the HMLSQ into this course was based on the understanding one's preferred learning style can help a learner engage more effectively with their learning process. Knowing how one prefers to learn may also contribute to better time management, as learners can focus their study time on strategies and materials that are more compatible with their cognitive preferences. Incidentally, the HMLSQ section was followed by a section on time management. The HMLSQ is self-administered, designed so that the results are available immediately, providing all students in the PGDip EC with the opportunity to reflect on their learning preferences from the outset. A discussion forum within the learning platform provided an opportunity for learners to share their preferences and challenges with their peers, using a structured scenario based on engaging with a journal article.

The HMLSQ in this study was intended as a self-directed tool that learners could use to engage more consciously with their learning experience. Vygotsky emphasised that development occurs within the ZPD, where individuals can achieve more with the aid of structured tools than they could independently.³⁰ The HMLSQ was offered as a structured opportunity for all learners, to reflect on their learning style and approach to study. The aim was not to categorise or label learners, but to provide a quick and accessible method for increasing self-awareness about how they typically engage with learning tasks. However, consistent with Vygotsky's view that tools must be socially mediated to be effective, the questionnaire was most valuable when paired with feedback or dialogue, enabling learners to interpret their results within a supported environment. In this self-administered study, students received written feedback on their learning style profile, encouraging them to consider how their preferences might influence engagement with different types of academic tasks. They were also invited to explore these reflections through peer engagement on the institutional learning platform, which offered an asynchronous space to discuss strategies and experiences. This reflects Lang's¹²³ conclusion that learning styles alone cannot predict behaviour;

rather, they function best as developmental prompts within a broader sociocultural framework. Moreover, recognising that learner behaviour is dynamic and context-dependent, the HMLSQ was positioned not as a fixed typology but as a scaffold to facilitate reflection, adaptability, and guided academic growth.

7.5 Methods

The HMLSQ was used without modification and incorporated as part of the first course in the PGDip EC programme during 2021 and 2022; all learners on the programme thus completed the questionnaire (Table 9).¹²⁰ To support the HMLSQ's application, the researcher developed a two-page document explaining the learning styles, suggestions to integrate them into learning, and learning activity recommendations based on preferred styles (Appendix 5). This document was attached to the questionnaire to enhance its practical utility.¹²⁰ The questionnaire was uploaded onto the LMS as a quiz, ensuring accessibility and integration into the programme. Upon completing the HMLSQ, learners received immediate results detailing their predominant learning style(s), which they could use to reflect on their approaches to learning and adapt their strategies accordingly. The programme convenor then sent the completed questionnaires to the researcher.

Table 9: 2021 and 2022 PGDip EC Learners who Participated in the HMLSQ

	Total participants	RPL candidates	Non-RPL candidates
2021 cohort	24	11	13
2022 cohort	35	22	13

7.5.1 Ethical concerns

Recognising learners as a vulnerable population, the HMLSQ was incorporated into the PGDip EC programme to minimise additional demands on their time. Vulnerable learners often face academic pressures, time constraints, and emotional stress, which external requirements can exacerbate.¹³⁰ Embedding the HMLSQ within the programme ensured that learners could complete it without allocating extra time or effort beyond their scheduled academic commitments.

7.5.2 Ethical approval

Ethical approvals were obtained, as illustrated under subheading 6.4.

7.6 Validation of the Questionnaire

The HMLSQ has undergone considerable scrutiny regarding its validity and reliability, producing findings that reflect both its potential and its limitations. Several studies have confirmed its ability to differentiate between distinct learning preferences, reporting acceptable levels of internal consistency when used to generate self-reported learner profiles.^{26,125} A factorial validity study reinforced its structural soundness by demonstrating its capacity to identify coherent learning style groupings, which supports its application as a learner support instrument rather than a diagnostic one.^{26,125}

Although the psychometric robustness of the HMLSQ remains contested, its persistent use in adult and professional learning contexts speaks to its practical value.^{125,131} Its concise format, straightforward language, and ease of administration make it especially well-suited for learners who may be unfamiliar with academic conventions.¹²⁶ By incorporating this easy-to-use, self-interpreting tool into the programme, learners were able to complete and interpret it with relative ease, making it more accessible than complex alternatives, particularly in settings where formal academic support may be limited, such as online programmes.^{27,76,129-133}

The HMLSQ was included in the PGDip EC as a tool to support learners by indicating their learning preference. It was anticipated that there may be a difference between the RPL candidates and non-RPL students, considering that the former had typically progressed through practically oriented short courses while the latter had experienced formal higher education. The RPL candidates came from traditional, teacher-led, classroom-based learning environments that focused on procedural and applied knowledge rather than academic self-direction. In contrast, non-RPL learners were more likely to have been exposed to independent learning strategies and academic conventions. Within this context, the HMLSQ was not intended to label or stratify learners but to provide insight into learning preferences that students may not have previously recognised.

Its function aligned with the broader aim of this research, which sought to scaffold vocational learners' transition into postgraduate study. Viewed through this lens, the HMLSQ operated as a mediating artefact in line with Vygotsky's SCT, enabling learners to engage with and interpret their own learning behaviours within their ZDP.^{2,30,31}

7.7 Data Analysis

The data collected from the HMLSQ were analysed using simple descriptive analysis. The preferred learning styles for each learner were exported to a password-protected Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, ensuring data security and access limited to the research team. Each learning style was ranked from 1 (most preferred) to 4 (least preferred). A two-step sequence was then followed in 2021, which was repeated in 2022:

1. The cohort's dominant and least preferred learning styles for each year were identified.
2. The cohort's dominant and least preferred learning styles for each year were compared between RPL and non-RPL learners.

Finally, the results from the 2021 cohort were compared to those of the 2022 cohort.

7.8 Results

Figures 8-10 illustrate the distribution of learning styles among the 2021 and 2022 cohorts of the PGDip EC programme. The data are further segmented to highlight differences between RPL candidates and non-RPL candidates for each year, providing a detailed overview of the learning styles within these groups.

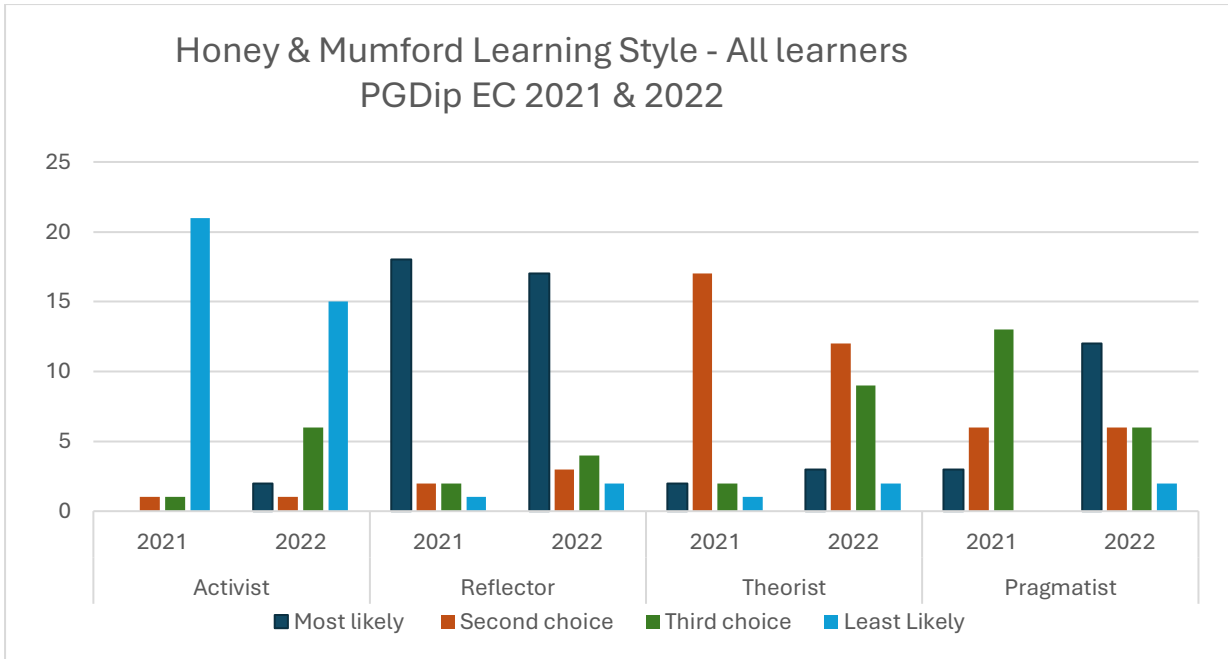


Figure 8: HMLSQ Learning Styles of the 2021 and 2022 PGDip EC Cohorts

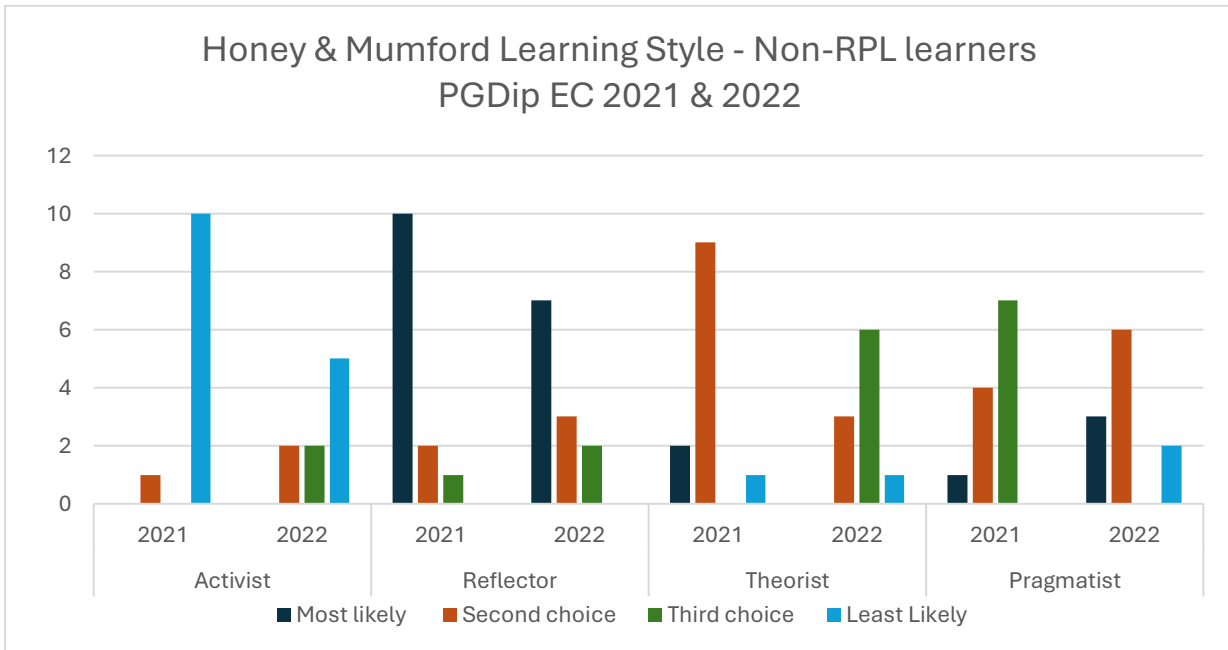


Figure 9: HMLSQ Learning Styles of the 2021 and 2022 PGDip EC Cohorts - Non-RPL

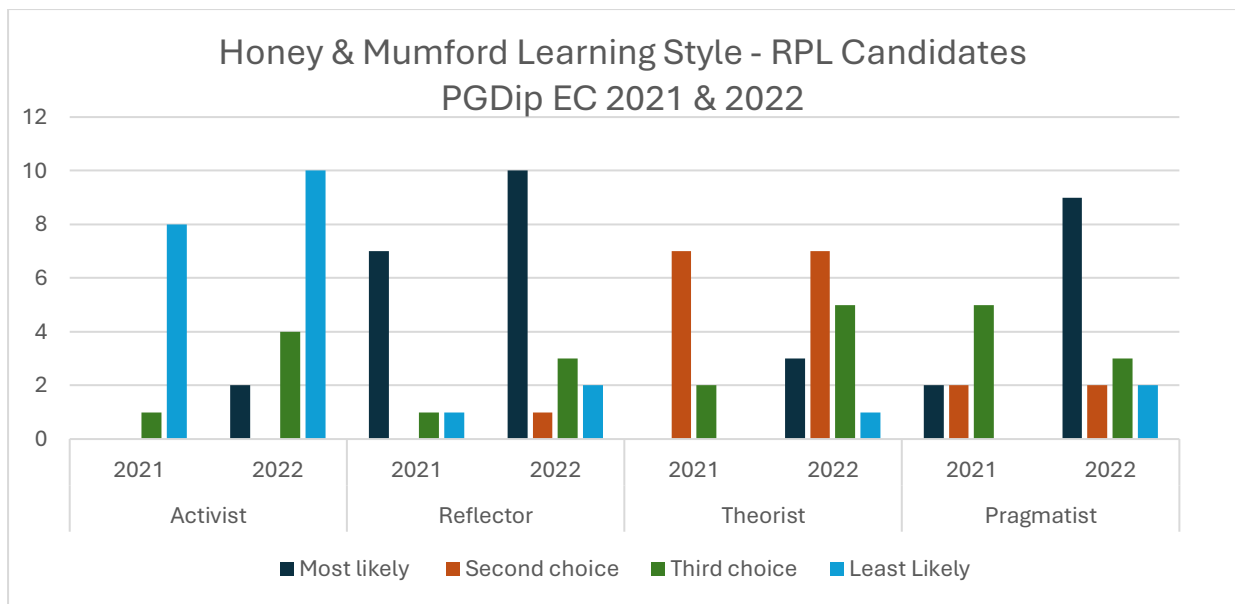


Figure 10: HMLSQ Learning Styles of the 2021 and 2022 PGDip EC Cohorts – RPL Candidates

The HMLSQ results for the PGDip EC cohorts indicated preferences across the 2021 and 2022 groups:

7.8.1 Overall cohort (RPL and Non-RPL) 2021 and 2022

Among all learners across both years, the Reflector learning style emerged as the most preferred ($n = 35$) (figure 5). Pragmatist ($n = 15$) and Theorist ($n = 5$) followed as less common primary preferences, while Activist was rarely selected as most likely ($n = 2$). One learner showed a dual preference as their top style. For second-choice styles, Theorist was the most frequently selected ($n = 29$), followed by Pragmatist ($n = 12$), Reflector ($n = 5$), and Activist ($n = 2$). Third-choice responses showed Pragmatist as the most frequent ($n = 19$), followed by Theorist ($n = 11$), Reflector ($n = 6$), and Activist ($n = 7$). Activist was most commonly identified as the least likely learning style ($n = 36$), while few learners selected Reflector ($n = 3$), Theorist ($n = 3$), or Pragmatist ($n = 5$) in this category.

7.8.2 Non-RPL cohort 2021 and 2022

Among non-RPL learners, Reflector was the most frequently selected as the most likely learning style in both 2021 ($n = 10$) and 2022 ($n = 7$). No learner selected Activist as their most likely style in either year. One learner showed a dual preference at the

most likely level, indicating equal preference for two learning styles. For second-choice preferences, Theorist was most frequently selected in 2021 (n = 9) and remained common in 2022 (n = 3). Pragmatist was selected by four learners in 2021 and six in 2022, while Reflector was chosen by two learners in each year. Activist was identified as a second preference by one learner in 2021 and two in 2022. Additionally, six learners indicated a dual preference at the second-choice level. Third-choice responses in 2021 showed Pragmatist (n = 7) as the most frequent, followed by Reflector (n = 1), with no learners selecting Theorist or Activist. In 2022, Theorist was the most common third choice (n = 6), followed by Reflector (n = 2), with two learners selecting Activist and none selecting Pragmatist. Activist was most selected as the least likely learning style: 10 learners in 2021 and 5 in 2022.

7.8.3 RPL cohort 2021 and 2022

Among RPL learners, Reflector was the most frequently selected as the most likely learning style in both 2021 (n = 7) and 2022 (n = 10). Pragmatist followed closely in 2021 (n = 2) and 2022 (n = 9). Theorist was selected as most likely by three learners in 2022 and none in 2021. Activist was selected as most likely by two learners in 2022, while no RPL learners selected it in 2021. Three learners in 2022 indicated a dual preference at the most likely level. For second-choice preferences, Theorist was the most frequently selected in both 2021 (n = 7) and 2022 (n = 7). Pragmatist was chosen by two learners in each year, and Reflector was selected by one learner in 2022 only. No RPL learner selected Activist as a second choice. No dual second-choice preferences were reported among RPL learners. Third-choice responses in 2021 showed Pragmatist (n = 5) as the most frequent, followed by Theorist (n = 2), Reflector (n = 1), and Activist (n = 1). In 2022, Theorist remained the most frequent third choice (n = 5), followed by Pragmatist (n = 3), Reflector (n = 3), and Activist (n = 4). Activist was most selected as the least likely style, with 8 learners in 2021 and 10 in 2022. Fewer learners selected Reflector (n = 1 in each year), Theorist (n = 0 in 2021, n = 1 in 2022), or Pragmatist (n = 0 in 2021, n = 2 in 2022) as least likely.

7.9 Discussion

The observation that the Activist learning style was the least dominant among PGDip EC learners aligns with existing research, indicating that healthcare professionals

often exhibit a Reflector learning style.^{133,134} For instance, a study exploring learning style differences between undergraduate and postgraduate medical learners found that undergraduate learners often identify as Activists, favouring hands-on, experiential learning. In contrast, postgraduate learners tend to adopt a Reflector style, emphasising observation and analysis.⁶⁵ This shift in learning preferences is thought to reflect the increasing cognitive and reflective demands of advanced academic and professional roles.¹³³

The tiered paramedical training system in South Africa also fostered growth within a hierarchical structure that could support the development of Reflector-style learning. This system allows paramedics to progress through clearly defined levels of responsibility and skill, often under the guidance of more experienced practitioners. Such progression provides structured opportunities to observe mentors, engage with decision-making processes, and learn how protocols are applied in real time. These experiences encourage paramedics to build knowledge incrementally, relying on reflective practices to evaluate progress and adapt to increasing levels of complexity and responsibility^{13,99}

The Reflector style observed among the RPL candidates in the PGDip EC programme may also signify a natural progression in learning maturity.¹²⁹ Although these candidates may not have traditional undergraduate experience, their substantial professional exposure supports their tendency to observe, gather information, and consider multiple perspectives before drawing conclusions.¹²⁹ This preference may stem from repeated exposure to real-time decision-making in high-risk environments, where observing senior colleagues, reviewing protocols, and analysing outcomes are necessary before acting. Research in health professions education further suggests that experienced practitioners often favour careful observation and retrospective sense-making, particularly in environments that demand accuracy, safety, and accountability

The Reflector learning style also resonates with the structure of the PGDip EC programme, which emphasises evidence-based learning, evaluation, and systematic problem-solving.^{9,124} Such practices are particularly well-suited to healthcare, where professionals must continually assess outcomes, adapt their approaches, and

prioritise patient safety and quality of care. In this way, the programme's design reinforces the reflective strengths of RPL candidates, enabling them to succeed in both academic and professional roles.^{6,129,132}

Feedback from learners reinforced this alignment. As part of the programme, participants were asked to reflect on their outcomes of their HMLSQ in the learning management system. Some learners commented on its usefulness: one reflected, *"I was excited to learn my learning style – I am a reflector. I think this will help me with studying,"* while another noted, *"I read about your learning style and think it will count in your favour."* These discussions encouraged interaction between learners and prompted reflection on their learning styles, with participants perceiving the tool as useful for supporting engagement in the programme.

While the Reflector style emerged as the most dominant among the participants, it is acknowledged that other learning styles continue to play a role in the learning process. For instance, Activists may be particularly important during the initial stages of learning when engaging with practical skills, while Theorists and Pragmatists contribute to the consolidation and application of knowledge. Thus, although Reflector was most prominent, the presence of multiple styles illustrates that learning is not a singular process but rather a dynamic interplay of approaches that shift according to context and task.

7.10 The Reflector Learning Style and Vygotsky's Framework

In this study, the Reflector learning style's dominance among PGDip EC learners aligns closely with Vygotsky's ZPD. Reflective learners thrive in environments that encourage systematic evaluation and the integration of new knowledge through careful observation and analysis.²⁸ These qualities resonate with the core principles of the ZPD, where learners are supported to bridge the gap between their current abilities and the demands of complex academic and professional tasks.³¹

For RPL candidates, the ZPD offers a theoretical foundation for understanding their learning progression. Many of these candidates lack traditional undergraduate education but have extensive practical experience. This experiential knowledge is a

foundation within their ZPD, enabling them to grasp postgraduate-level concepts when scaffolded by structured support systems. The Reflector style complements this process, as reflective learners naturally engage with the analytical and evaluative practices required to navigate their ZPD effectively.^{28,30}

Both PGDip EC cohorts in this study demonstrated a preference for the Reflector learning style, indicating that reflective learning strategies may be particularly well-suited to the cognitive and professional demands of the programme. Reflective learners typically thrive in environments that promote critical observation, structured analysis, and the thoughtful integration of new knowledge—competencies that are foundational for success in postgraduate education, where independent inquiry and evaluative engagement are essential.²⁸ This alignment also resonates with Vygotsky's view that learners advance most effectively when guided through socially mediated interactions.³⁰ For RPL candidates, who may lack formal academic preparation but bring substantial experiential knowledge, the ZPD offers a theoretical lens through which their learning trajectory can be understood. Their practical experience functions as a base within the ZPD from which scaffolded engagement can facilitate the assimilation of complex academic content.³¹ That both RPL and non-RPL cohorts showed similar preferences for the Reflector style is an encouraging outcome; it indicates a shared orientation toward reflective engagement, regardless of educational background. This convergence allows for the design of inclusive support strategies that do not need to be differentiated based on admission status, but rather on shared cognitive approaches.

CHAPTER 8: From Vocational to Graduation: A Mixed Methods Study of Support Needs for Vocational Learners Pursuing Postgraduate Education in South Africa

Declaration from author and co-authors

The following co-author contributed to the publication: Cunningham, C.

The authors' contributions were as follows:

DG and CC contributed to the conception and design of the study. DG conducted the data analysis, drafted the manuscript, and contributed to its revision. CC provided critical revisions to the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

The extent of each person's contributions follows:

- DG: 70%
- CC: 30%

The headings and citation numbers have been updated to align with the body of the thesis; the content remains as per publication.

Debbie Groome

10 February 2025



Charmaine Cunningham

10 February 2025



8.1 Abstract

8.1.1 Introduction

Vocational learning has been critical in shaping South Africa's workforce, especially for paramedicine. The introduction of the National Qualification Framework (NQF) in 1995 phased out previous short course learning systems and redesigned qualifications within the framework. While recognition of prior learning is well advocated in the NQF, the predominant focus is undergraduate studies. The leap from vocational to Higher Education can be significant, especially for non-seasoned learners, and additional support may be required to ensure a successful transition. This study describes the support needs of vocational paramedics transitioning to postgraduate education.

8.1.2 Methods

The study used a two-phase sequential design to achieve the aims. The first phase was conducted in 2021 and involved an analysis of grades followed by semi-structured interviews to obtain qualitative insights. The second phase, conducted in 2022, focused exclusively on collecting quantitative data to validate and expand upon the initial findings from phase one.

8.1.3 Results

Analysis of the academic results over two years between Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and non-RPL candidates showed a difference of 4% in the aggregated mark. This shows that the RPL candidates have the academic acumen to succeed in a postgraduate diploma education programme. Interview analysis revealed the support requirements were not academic but rather technological and institutional, with navigation of the university's learning management system being a common challenge.

8.1.4 Conclusion

This study highlights the academic ability of students from vocational backgrounds to succeed in postgraduate programmes. These learners demonstrated strong academic performance despite entering higher education through a non-traditional pathway. Whilst advocating for consideration and refinement of the role of RPL within the NQF,

this research suggests a re-evaluation of current support systems for vocational learners transitioning to postgraduate studies.

Keywords: 'Recognition of Prior Learning', 'Vocational learning', 'vocational paramedic', 'postgraduate studies', 'support needs'

8.2 Introduction

Historically, vocational learning has served as an invaluable pathway for individuals entering the workforce, particularly those without traditional academic credentials. Emphasising practical skills and job-specific training, vocational learning adopts a direct, hands-on approach, equipping learners with the competencies vital for specific occupations.⁵⁴ This form of education has proven instrumental in empowering individuals by offering a practical route to employment.⁵⁴ The emphasis on hands-on training ensures alignment with the dynamic needs of evolving industries. Moreover, the accessibility of vocational learning and the possibility of earning a wage or stipend during the training period enhances its appeal. Vocational learning is pivotal for those seeking swift integration into the job market and desiring sustainable personal and professional growth.

Despite the vital role of vocational learning in bridging industry gaps, a pressing need emerged for transformation and formalised education structures in South Africa to eliminate marginalisation and foster equal opportunities for learners. In response, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) was established, serving as a cornerstone in orchestrating the nation's educational and vocational terrain.⁷ Initiated in 1995, the NQF systematically organises various qualifications into levels that reflect academic progression and serves as a benchmark to ensure that the standards and quality of education remain consistent across different institutions and sectors.⁷ It encompasses formal, informal, and workplace-based learning and is governed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) – a regulatory body responsible for developing, upholding, and aligning the NQF.^{7,10}

SAQA's functions extend to validating qualifications and ensuring that educational endeavours are recognised across varied spheres.⁷ A noteworthy initiative under

SAQA is the endorsement of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which values informal skills acquisition, promoting the visibility and credibility of non-traditional learning paths and access.^{7,10} By internationalising the standards of the NQF, South Africa elevates the standing of its qualifications on the global stage, fostering a highly competitive and proficient workforce.

Without the RPL framework, vocational learners would encounter significant barriers to having prior learning experiences recognised, hindering progression in education and professional development. Though RPL focuses on undergraduate programmes, the potential for transition to postgraduate level also exists. The classification of qualifications and emphasis on credit accumulation and transfer within the NQF create a defined pathway for career growth, reducing the risk of marginalising some learners.⁷

Despite the vision of empowering the vocational learner, many sectors experienced challenges transitioning to NQF-aligned qualifications. The gap between vocational training and the NQF benchmark is apparent in South Africa's prehospital emergency services sector. Traditionally, the path to becoming a paramedic in South Africa was through a short course-tiered system accredited by the Health Professions Council of South Africa.⁴ However, these short courses lacked alignment with the NQF and SAQA, and a comprehensive review of emergency care programmes ensued. This led to the development of NQF-aligned qualifications in emergency care and the phasing out of the short-course approach in 2018.³⁵

The non-alignment of the paramedical short course curriculum to the NQF and SAQA framework prevented the direct articulation of the vocational paramedics into formal education. Despite the objective set by the NQF to 'accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training, and employment opportunities', the vocational workforce now faced the challenge of aligning diverse vocational skills with the standardised levels and categories outlined within the framework.⁷ The NQF, while enhancing the recognition of formal education, could inadvertently leave behind those who have traditionally thrived in vocational learning environments.

8.3 Recognition of Prior Learning

RPL is defined as ‘a process through which non-formal learning and informal learning are measured, mediated across different contexts, and certified against the requirements for credit, access, inclusion or advancement in the formal education and training system, or workplace’.¹⁰

For vocational paramedics, RPL enables them to leverage knowledge and practical experience to meet the academic prerequisites necessary for transitioning into postgraduate studies.

Although RPL is crucial for paramedics to progress academically, more tailored RPL initiatives are needed in the emergency care sector. Vocational paramedics, often primary breadwinners in mid-career, face hurdles like full-time work, remote locations, and limited university access.¹³³ Many are based in remote areas, and most higher education institutions are urban-based.

There are opportunities and challenges within the educational landscape for vocational paramedics. While RPL is acclaimed as a national pathway to undergraduate education, offering a gateway for seasoned providers to formalise their expertise, the available RPL programmes in South Africa are limited. This gap presents a considerable obstacle for those seeking to elevate their professional qualifications within the educational framework.⁴⁴ While the scope of this study is centred on the South African context, the insights gained are believed to have implications for and applicability to other regions that are developing or implementing out-of-hospital emergency care systems.

8.4 Educational Transformation

In 2021, the Division of Emergency Medicine at the University of Cape Town (UCT) launched the Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care (PGDip EC), an NQF Level 8 qualification. Designed as a one-year interdisciplinary programme, it aims to enhance the skills of medical professionals in emergency systems, focusing on theory, clinical practice, research, and leadership, particularly benefiting those in rural settings. Its

online delivery allows learners to continue working full-time, transcending geographical barriers.⁶⁶ The programme draws a broad range of participants from across Africa. It incorporates RPL to provide access to vocationally trained nurses and paramedics.

8.5 Problem Statement

Navigating the transition from vocational training to postgraduate education demands understanding the needs of vocational learners. Identifying the needs and barriers they face during this transformative period is essential. By recognising these and tailoring support mechanisms to address them, educational institutions can develop effective support systems that facilitate a smoother transition for vocational learners. This will enable the successful navigation of the academic terrain.

8.6 Aims

The aims of this study were to:

- Determine the performance of RPL candidates in comparison to non-RPL candidates
- Determine if RPL students need additional support during the programme

8.7 Study Design

A two-stage sequential design was followed. The first stage used an explanatory mixed-method approach, beginning with an analysis of grades followed by semi-structured interviews. Inclusion criteria: the 2021 PGDip EC cohort that completed the programme. The second stage included the 2022 cohort, and quantitative data were collected to expand and triangulate the phase one findings. Figure 8 shows the research design with the stages and phases.

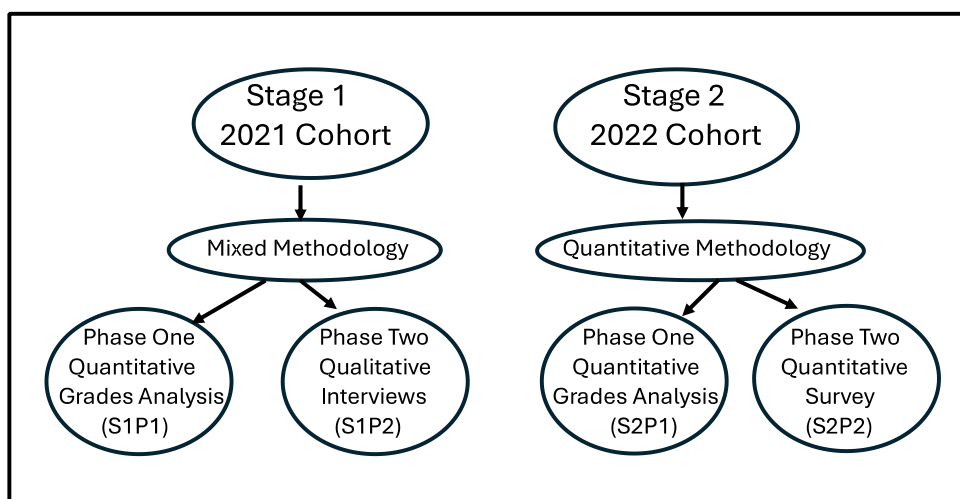


Figure 11: Display of Research Design

8.7.1 Trustworthiness

The study was designed to meet Guba and Lincoln’s criteria for trustworthiness.^{114, 134} An interview guide was used during the semi-structured interviews to ensure consistency across all participants. During the thematic analysis stage, coding was conducted after each interview. An external research assistant completed independent coding to minimise bias and enhance dependability, followed by a comparison and discussion of any discrepancies. As this study is embedded within a larger study, the results were triangulated against multiple data sources, including quantitative data from all stages, to enhance confirmability. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the research process, allowing the researcher to document personal insights and reflect on potential biases, further contributing to the study’s rigour.

8.7.2 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Cape Town (reference numbers 041/2022 and 042/2022). In addition, permission was granted by the Department of Student Affairs at the University of Cape Town to include UCT candidates in the research.

8.8 Data Collection

Stage one

Stage one, phase one

Stage one, phase one, included the analysis of the final grades from the 2021 PGDip EC cohort. This entailed comparing the academic progress and outcomes of RPL students against the non-RPL peers to gauge and differentiate respective academic performances.

Stage one, phase two

All RPL candidates from the 2021 PGDip EC cohort were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The purpose was to explore their experiences, challenges and the support required. Interviews were arranged approximately six weeks before the end of the programme, allowing the capture of immediate reflections while avoiding disruption of exam preparations.

Participants were contacted via email, providing information about the study and the interview process. If they provided written consent, they were contacted for an online interview. Microsoft Teams (Microsoft Corporation; Redmond, Washington, U.S.) was used to conduct these interviews. The written consent was followed by verbal consent as the interview started.

Interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded. Audio files were securely deleted after transcription. The transcribed data are stored on an encrypted OneDrive account (OneDrive, Microsoft Corporation; Redmond, Washington, U.S.).

The method developed by Braun and Clarke was used to perform thematic analysis.¹³⁵ Enablers and barriers were identified and further categorised into themes, see Table 12.

Stage two

Stage two, phase one

This stage focused on the PGDip EC 2022 cohort. Again, the final grades between RPL and non-RPL were compared and then contextualised by comparing the results with the PGDip EC 2021 cohort.

Stage two, phase two

A survey was sent to the PGDip EC 2022 RPL candidates at the end of the programme. It was designed to ascertain the support students found most valuable in their academic journey. Participation in the survey was voluntary.

Responses were entered into a password-protected Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The answers were analysed to identify correlations, specifically emphasising the support requirements. The results of these surveys were also correlated against the qualitative data collection in phase one. This ensured the triangulation of results.^{136,137}

8.9 Results

The analysis of the 2021 and 2022 cohorts provides a comparative perspective on the performance of RPL and non-RPL candidates (Table 10). In 2021, the 10 RPL candidates achieved a mean grade of 68.8% (median 70%, IQR 64.5–72.5), compared with a mean of 72.7% (median 71%, IQR 68–74) for the 13 non-RPL candidates. All RPL candidates passed the programme, and several attained marks above the average of their non-RPL peers. The relatively narrow IQRs for both groups (8% for RPL, 6% for non-RPL) indicate that most students were clustered within a similar grade range, suggesting consistent performance across the cohort.

In 2022, the 21 RPL candidates attained a mean grade of 67.6% (median 68%, IQR 64–73), compared with 72.0% (median 71%, IQR 69–74) for the 9 non-RPL candidates. Again, all RPL candidates achieved a pass, with more than half scoring above the overall cohort mean. The IQR values (9% for RPL, 5% for non-RPL) show that the middle 50% of both groups performed within a relatively tight range, though RPL candidates displayed slightly greater variability.

Overall, these comparisons demonstrate that while non-RPL candidates achieved marginally higher averages, the differences between the groups were small when both central tendency and distribution were considered. The data therefore indicate that RPL candidates were not only able to meet the academic requirements of postgraduate study but did so at levels comparable to their traditionally admitted peers, reinforcing the viability of RPL as a pathway for access.

Table 10: Grade Averages

Cohort of PGDip EC	Number of candidates per cohort per year		Grade average per cohort per year	
	2021	2022	2021	2022
RPL candidates	10	21	69%	68%
Non-RPL candidates	13	9	73%	72%

Nine of the possible ten RPL candidates gave consent to be interviewed. One was unavailable due to a work assignment. Interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. Three primary themes were identified: individual, academic, and institutional, each comprising distinct enablers and barriers. Written reflections were made to support further analysis.

Table 11 reflects the codes and themes found in the thematic analysis. To maintain anonymity, participants are labelled as P(number).

Table 11: Themes and Codes Identified in Thematic Analysis of Interviews

Quotation	Theme	Code
'...battled to write academically, English is not my first language' (P4)	Academic > Scientific writing	Academic Barrier
'The way I used to read a paper and the way I read the paper now is like worlds apart. And then there was the actual academic writing, I struggled with that' (P6)	Academic > Scientific writing	
'...academic writing to complete our assignments was really difficult and it took me at least four or five of the assignments to work out what they wanted.' (P7)	Academic > Scientific writing	

Quotation	Theme	Code
'...been many years since I studied formally, so it took a while to get back into it' (P2)	Academic > Ability to learn	
'I had to go and buy a new computer for the course because mine was outdated...' (P3)	Academic > Technology	
'...had to keep up as never knew when the internet wouldn't work.' (P4)	Academic > Technology	
'I was in the middle of the (rural) and there was literally no (internet) signal.' (P8)	Academic > Technology	
'It was not easy because there were so many deadlines.' (P4)	Individual > Time	Individual Barrier
'I can remember a lot of weekends indoors. That's one thing I recall because I always thought to myself I will be done by Thursday and I'm gonna be off this weekend, but I found I almost spent every weekend working.' (P9)	Individual > Time	
'I think the students integrate well; we had a lot of group work with people that qualified through university. They never looked down on us guys.' (P1)	Individual > fear of failure	
'I was able to discuss and interact with people in a way where my opinion means something, even if it may have been wrong.' (P8)	Individual > fear of failure	
'...family were really supportive and understanding' (P9)	Individual > support structures	Individual Enabler
'I called friends in (local emergency medical service) to help me when I got stuck' (P6)	Individual > support structures	
'...wanted to prove myself, so worked really hard' (P2)	Individual > personal motivation	
'I battled with how this (Learning Management system) works and how the online libraries worked' (P2)	Institutional > orientation	Institutional Barrier
'I didn't know which department in the varsity to go to so I asked (course convenor)' (P5)	Institutional > orientation	

The online questionnaires sent to the 2022 cohort of RPL candidates focused on specific support areas within the programme, providing multiple-choice responses and open-ended feedback. To determine which university support systems had been used during their studies, various scenario questions were posed to the RPL candidates, requesting them to indicate their chosen answer, such as, 'If you battled with (learning management system) (LMS) after hours, who did you ask for help?' and 'If you did not understand an academic concept, who would you ask for help?'. Analysis of both tick box options and free text revealed a marked preference among the candidates for engaging directly with the programme convenor to address all issues related to their academic pursuits. This preference spanned matters ranging from technology and financial assistance to everyday academic challenges. This is despite detailed information provided regarding support departments and individual course lecturer details.

8.10 Discussion

RPL is a transformative approach within higher education, vital in widening access and advocating the philosophy that learning occurs through a myriad of avenues outside formal educational structures.^{10,42} Its strategic implementation retrospectively acknowledges the wealth of knowledge and skills that individuals learn through work and life experiences, thereby offering a remedial pathway to formal qualifications and, by extension, educational advancement. The RPL framework is crucial for inclusion and has the potential to recalibrate academic outcomes, as it brings diverse perspectives and expertise into the academic sphere.

Evaluation of RPL candidates' academic performance presents compelling evidence concerning their intellectual mettle. The comparative results indicated an insignificant difference between the academic accomplishments of RPL and non-RPL candidates, as noted by a 4% grade difference, reinforcing the assertion that RPL candidates are academically proficient and capable of standing their ground within the educational landscape. While seemingly slight, this modest grade disparity between RPL and non-RPL students has implications within the broader academic trajectory of RPL candidates. It ascertains the efficacy of RPL as a conduit for integrating vocational

learners into formal education. RPL students met the foundational benchmarks and consistently aligned with the competencies expected at the NQF Level 8. The proximity of their performance to their non-RPL peers highlights the legitimacy of prior vocational and life learning as a substantive indicator of academic capability and potential. This suggests that the RPL process, in its current implementation, successfully facilitates a transition into higher education for individuals possessing substantial professional experience, positioning them well within the academic expectations of postgraduate study.

To further explore the support requirements of RPL candidates, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 2021 cohort. These interviews provided candidates with the opportunity to discuss their personal challenges, successes, and the support structures they had drawn upon during their studies. Building on these insights, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to the 2022 RPL cohort. The design of this questionnaire was directly informed by the themes and data generated through the interviews, enabling the inclusion of structured lists of institutional support services as well as categories of individuals such as tutors, lecturers, peers, and workplace mentors who were positioned to provide support. This approach allowed data to be systematically captured on both the services that learners had accessed and the additional areas of support they considered necessary, thereby extending and refining the understanding of learner support needs across consecutive cohorts.

In the thematic analysis, three main themes of support emerged: individual, academic, and institutional support. This aligns with the data collected through the questionnaire, as well as with findings from other studies that have examined the support requirements of vocational learners transitioning into postgraduate education.¹³³

Barriers were evident, particularly in adjusting to the technological requirements. Accustomed to traditional classroom settings and textbooks, vocational learners encountered challenges adapting to digital learning environments. They required additional support in technological literacy, navigating online platforms, and utilising referencing tools. In this study, age disparities were initially considered a potential cause of these barriers, but it was noted that the average age of the 2021 PGDip EC cohort was 39.25 years, with RPL candidates averaging 38.72 years and non-RPL

candidates 37.84 years. These similar age groups indicate that the challenges faced were not necessarily age-related but stemmed from adjusting to new learning modalities. This may suggest a disconnect between their prior educational experiences and the expectations of postgraduate studies.

Institutional barriers included hesitancy in accessing formal support services provided by the university, such as writing centres. Curiously, the RPL students often turned to the programme convenor for guidance on issues not directly pertinent to the programme content, such as difficulties accessing the learning management system. This suggests a reliance on the programme convenor, which mirrors the vocational learning environment where a singular coordinator is often responsible for managing the student's vocational training, serving as a central point of contact for any support. It may indicate a gap in how institutional support structures are communicated and perceived by RPL candidates. To bridge this divide and provide additional assistance, institutions may consider revising their orientation and strategies to highlight university support centres, enhancing the accessibility and personalisation of services for this student cohort. Additionally, universities could ensure that available services are well-communicated regularly. This could foster smoother transitions for RPL candidates.

8.11 Limitations

The study focused on the vocational paramedic sector in South Africa, thereby limiting the applicability of its findings to other vocational fields or regions as the results may not reflect the broader vocational learner population or other disciplines that could have different challenges. Further studies with more diverse vocational disciplines are necessary.

8.12 Conclusion

The study illuminated the academic landscape for vocational learners who gained access to the programme via an RPL process. Despite navigating a non-traditional pathway into higher education, the learners demonstrated academic performance, consistently meeting and often exceeding the standards required at a postgraduate level. However, the integration of RPL into South Africa's NQF invites scrutiny over

the equitable recognition of vocational education and the persistent barriers that impede the smoother transition into higher education institutions. It is essential to carefully refine the role of RPL within the NQF, re-evaluating support systems and advocating for approaches recognising the unique pathways. Ensuring fairness and accessibility, such deliberation is crucial to enriching the educational landscape with the diverse skills and experiences that vocational learners introduce. Additional research across various vocational professions and regions could reinforce these findings and provide a broader understanding of the support needed for successful transitions to higher education.

8.13 Dissemination of results

The results of this survey were shared with the Division of Emergency Care, University of Cape Town. They were also presented at the Western Cape Provincial Emergency Medical Services research day.

8.14 Discussion

The above article presented the overall programme averages for the 2021 and 2022 cohorts, highlighting the comparative performance of RPL and non-RPL candidates. Table 12 provides a more detailed description of the average results achieved by RPL and non-RPL candidates across individual courses within the PGDip EC. By disaggregating the results in this way, the data offer a clearer view of performance patterns within specific subject areas and allow for a more nuanced understanding of the academic outcomes achieved by each group.

Table 12: Average results of RPL and non-RPL candidates across PGDip EC courses, 2021 and 2022

		Adult Emergency Care	Introduction to Postgraduate Studies	Concepts of Emergency Care	Child Health for Emergency Care	Research Literacy	Leadership and Patient Safety	TOTAL
2021	RPL	80%	71%	66%	70%	65%	63%	69%
	Non RPL	84%	76%	60%	76%	73%	67%	73%
2022	RPL	67%	72%	65%	68%	65%	69%	68%
	Non RPL	67%	77%	69%	73%	70%	76%	72%

When comparing performance at the course level, the results show that RPL candidates consistently achieved outcomes that were closely aligned with their non-RPL peers. In 2021, for example, RPL candidates averaged 80% in Adult Emergency Care, only slightly below the 84% achieved by non-RPL candidates, while performing comparably in Child Health for Emergency Care (70% vs. 76%). In some modules, such as Concepts of Emergency Care, RPL candidates outperformed non-RPL candidates (66% vs. 60%), suggesting that their vocational knowledge and practical experience may have provided a foundation for stronger performance in this domain. A similar trend is evident in 2022. In Adult Emergency Care, both groups achieved identical averages of 67%. In Concepts of Emergency Care, RPL candidates scored 65% compared to 69% for non-RPL candidates, while in Leadership and Patient Safety, the averages were 69% vs. 76%. Importantly, across both years, RPL candidates consistently met or exceeded the 50% pass threshold and maintained overall averages (69% in 2021 and 68% in 2022) that were only marginally lower than non-RPL candidates (73% in both years).

These results, however, are not representative of the effort and cognitive demand invested by RPL candidates. These grades must be viewed as indicative rather than exhaustive measures of capability. The close alignment of averages across modules indicates that RPL candidates were academically capable of meeting postgraduate demands. This consistency across two cohorts suggests that, while support needs were identified in areas such as technological navigation and institutional processes, RPL candidates demonstrated both the effort and cognitive capacity required to meet

the academic requirements of the programme, and in many respects were more prepared than initially envisioned.

CHAPTER 9: Support Needs for Vocational Learners Transitioning into Postgraduate Education: A Thematic Analysis

This article is currently under review with BMC Medical Education

Declaration from author and co-authors

The following co-author contributed to the article: Cunningham, C.

The authors confirm their contribution to the paper as follows: DG and CC: study conception and design, draft manuscript preparation. DG: Data collection: Initial thematic analysis and interpretation of results, draft manuscript preparation. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

The extent of each person's contributions follows:

- DG: 60%
- CC: 40%

The headings and citation numbers have been updated to align with the body of the thesis; the content remains as per the submitted article.

Debbi Groome

10 February 2025



Charmaine Cunningham

10 February 2025



9.1 Abstract

9.1.1 Background

The transition from vocational training to postgraduate education can be challenging. This study explored the support needs of vocational paramedics transitioning to a postgraduate diploma programme, aiming to identify barriers and enablers they encountered during their year of study.

9.1.2 Methods

This study involved semi-structured interviews with a cohort of vocational paramedics enrolled in a one-year postgraduate diploma programme at a South African university. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes related to support needs, barriers, and enablers.

9.1.3 Results

Three key themes emerged regarding support needs: the enabling role of recognition of prior Learning (RPL), academic barriers related to writing and digital literacy, and institutional challenges navigating university support structures and communication channels. Participants emphasised RPL as crucial for accessing the programme, valuing its recognition of their prior experience. However, they highlighted difficulties adapting to academic writing demands and navigating the learning platform, contrasting with their practical training. Participants relied heavily on the programme convenor for support, indicating unfamiliarity with broader university resources.

9.1.4 Conclusions

While RPL facilitates access to postgraduate education for vocational learners, targeted support is crucial for their success. By recognising the enablers and barriers, higher education institutions can provide targeted support aimed at overcoming the barriers experienced by those using RPL for access. Ultimately, this approach can benefit all learners and enrich the academic community by embracing the diverse perspectives and experiences that vocational learners bring to the postgraduate landscape.

Keywords: Vocational learners, recognition of prior learning, student support, academic transition, postgraduate education.

9.2 Introduction

Vocational learning, emphasising practical skills and workplace relevance, plays a vital role in shaping the global workforce. By equipping individuals with industry-relevant knowledge and hands-on experience, vocational education and training programmes provide a direct pathway to employment and contribute significantly to economic growth.¹³⁸ However, the evolving nature of work, driven by technological advancements and shifting industry demands, increasingly necessitates higher levels of education and training. This shift has resulted in programmes situated within higher education institutions as opposed to traditional vocational settings. Consequently, vocational learners now face the requirement of university entry to further their educational journey.

With its diverse economic landscape and historical inequalities, South Africa provides a compelling context for examining the experiences of vocational learners entering higher education. The National Qualification Framework (NQF) aimed to create a seamless and integrated education and training system, recognising the value of both vocational and academic pathways.⁷ Navigating this system and successfully moving from a vocational to a higher education environment can be challenging for learners. While substantial research explores vocational learners entering higher education at the undergraduate level, less is known about the experiences and support needs of those progressing directly to postgraduate studies.^{12,22,17,139,140}

Paramedicine in South Africa is an example of the global shift towards higher education in vocational fields. Historically, paramedic training was primarily vocational, involving short courses and on-the-job experience focused on practical skills and immediate patient care. The introduction of the NQF signalled educational change, requiring paramedics to attain higher education qualifications for advanced roles and leadership positions. Currently, entry into emergency medical care can be achieved through various undergraduate academic pathways, including a higher certificate, a diploma, or a full degree.⁴ Upon successful completion of one of these qualifications,

individuals become eligible for registration with the regulatory body – a prerequisite for operational work in the field.

This new landscape means that even experienced vocational paramedics with years of practical knowledge must now achieve an undergraduate qualification to formally advance their careers and pursue other higher education opportunities.⁴ As many do not meet the entry requirements, by using Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), these vocational paramedics can have their experience assessed and potentially credited towards formal qualifications

While offering opportunities for professional growth, entering higher education, particularly at the postgraduate level, can present several challenges for vocational learners. Learning environments of vocational training and higher education institutions often differ; vocational training typically emphasises hands-on experience and practical application, while higher education usually involves more theoretical and conceptual learning.¹⁰⁴ This difference in academic preparation can create a barrier to academic success. Additionally, vocational learners transitioning to postgraduate studies are often older, juggling work and family commitments alongside their studies, making time management and balancing competing demands a constant challenge.^{55,103}

Although the challenges faced are considerable, the most formidable barrier for vocational learners entering higher education at the postgraduate level often lies within. Years of encountering roadblocks in their educational journey, coupled with the demands of work and life, have been shown to impact self-confidence and create perceptions of academic limitations.^{20,81,99} The very act of navigating the RPL process and gaining acceptance can be a profound experience for these learners.¹³³

This paper explores the experiences of vocational learners transitioning to higher education in South Africa, using the case of paramedicine to illustrate the support requirements inherent in this process. By exploring the perspectives of these learners, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the support mechanisms needed to facilitate successful transition and address experienced barriers.

9.3 Aim of the Research

This paper aims to describe the experiences of vocational paramedics during a 12-month postgraduate diploma, specifically focusing on perceived support requirements.

9.4 Research Methods

A qualitative exploratory design was used with semi-structured interviews conducted with participants who met the inclusion criteria.

9.4.1 Study setting

This study setting was a Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care Studies. It is an interdisciplinary NQF level 8 qualification offered by a Higher Education Institute. The one-year online programme is designed for working professionals and blends theoretical and practical learning across clinical, research, and management domains. The programme accepts RPL candidates previously qualified via vocational learning, thus enabling individuals with relevant experience to gain admission to the Postgraduate programme by submitting a portfolio of evidence demonstrating their competency.

9.4.2 Population and sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed for this study. All RPL candidates enrolled in the 2021 cohort were invited to participate via email.

9.4.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria: RPL candidates from the 2021 cohort.

Exclusion criteria: Non-RPL candidates, candidates who applied to the programme via RPL but were not accepted for the 2021 programme, and RPL candidates not available during the period of interviews.

9.5 Data Collection

This study forms part of a larger study and a semi-structured interview guide (see supplementary file) was developed from a prior study.¹³³ Interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams. Interviews were timed to take place after completion of the programme, providing the participants an opportunity to reflect on their experiences throughout the year of study. Interviews took place during April and May of 2022. The study adhered to the criteria for reporting qualitative research guidelines for qualitative studies (COREQ).¹⁴¹

Eligible participants were contacted via email, providing information about the study, the interview process and consent forms. Upon receipt of the signed consent form, an hour was scheduled at a time convenient for both the researcher and the participant. The interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded and lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. Verbatim transcriptions were generated by Otter.ai.¹⁴²

9.6 Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis was used.¹³⁵ The original transcripts were checked against the audio recording for accuracy. Transcripts were then anonymised by coding each participant. Following this, a six-phase analysis process was conducted, including familiarisation with the data, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and final report production (Figure 12).

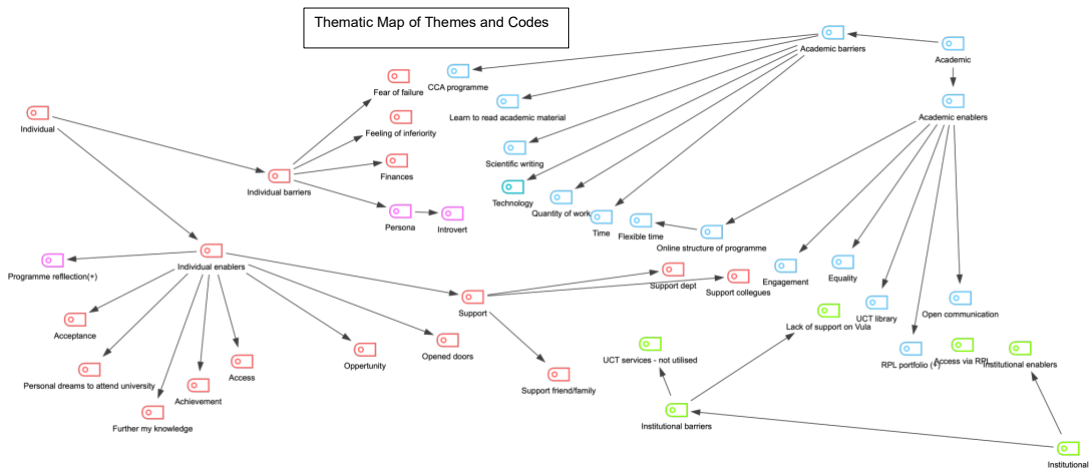


Figure 12: Thematic Map of Themes and Codes

9.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Cape Town (HREC 041/2022). Participation was voluntary. Potential participants were informed of the study’s objectives. Written consent was obtained prior to interviews. Participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point before the analysis commenced, with no negative consequences. To ensure anonymity, all identifying data was removed from the transcripts. Data was kept confidential on a password-protected device.

9.7.1 Trustworthiness

The study adhered to Guba and Lincoln’s description of trustworthiness. As part of a larger mixed-methods research project, the findings of this study were triangulated within the larger study to ensure credibility. Additionally, researcher triangulation and reflexive note-taking during interviews were also used. An audit trail of all research processes was kept ensuring dependability. To enhance the analysis’s reliability and validity, an independent research assistant reviewed the coding process, confirming the consistency and accuracy of the identified themes.^{114, 134,143}

9.8 Results

Ten interviews were conducted. Three main themes emerged with 12 categories that were subdivided into enablers and barriers (Table 13). The three themes were Individual, Academic and Institutional. Some categories were noted as both an enabler and a barrier.

Table 13: Themes and Categories

Themes	Categories
Individual Enabler and Barriers	RPL for access to online education
	Peer and familial support
	Balancing responsibilities whilst studying
	Self-esteem and fear of failure
Academic Enabler and Barriers	Feeling valued within a system
	Online education offers a degree of flexibility.
	Academic writing and literacy
	Technology
Institutional Enabler and Barriers	Departmental support and programme structure
	Programme structure
	Channels of communication
	University culture

9.8.1 Theme 1: Individual

In the context of this research, “individual enablers” refer to personal attributes or circumstances that facilitate an individual’s ability to succeed or adapt positively in their learning or professional environment. Conversely, “individual barriers” were considered personal challenges or limitations that hinder an individual’s progress or adaptation in their educational or vocational pursuits.

9.8.1.1 Enablers: Opportunities, access and support

RPL for access to online education

Participants shared their appreciation of the opportunity to pursue a postgraduate programme, emphasising that the process of RPL and the online format made advancing their education possible:

“I never finished school, I had to start working when I was 16. I never had a mom or dad supporting me. I was convinced I was going to get turned down. It was like that. I’m gonna get turned down because I don’t have a matric and not good enough. My history and experience of 17 years in EMS is not gonna mean anything. But it did and I got on. I now actually have something to show for my years of experience.”
(Participant 8).

“I always wanted to go to the university but I was looking forward to pursue the emergency side of things So it was quite difficult to go to the university as I had only CCA (vocational qualification). Hey, I didn’t have any other qualifications that let me go to the university. And then I just waited and prayed that one day I will go there when I saw this programme.” (Participant 6).

Peer and Familial support

Participants expressed great support, from in-class peers, to occupational colleagues and family. Although the programme was comprised of RPL and non-RPL candidates, it appeared that the group dynamic was supportive and collaborative:

“...it was more of my fellow colleagues, we used to have very great communication. We’d talk about the school work and we support each other. Uh, if we experienced any problems, we tend to ask each other how is it going on your side. Especially those who went to the university before.” (Participant 6).

“We kind of formed an alliance where we would communicate outside the class with each other and try to help each other and try to even just motivate each other...”
(Participant 4).

“A big benefit was having them on the course, especially when we had contact sessions. You approached them from your prehospital environment and then they will come in with their hospital knowledge or intensive care knowledge and, you know, bring a different view on, um, many things.” (Participant 2).

9.8.1.2 Barriers: Balance and personal obstacles

Balancing responsibilities whilst studying

Participants shared their difficulties in balancing their academic pursuits with existing responsibilities. The demanding nature of the programme, coupled with inflexible work schedules, often resulted in family time being sacrificed.

“The challenges that I can really think of was balancing schoolwork and then my career working and then family time, because obviously working full time it takes up a lot of time of your life. And now having to study full time online was also taking up a lot of time. So balancing that and then to try and fit the family in was stressful.”
(Participant 2).

Self-esteem and fear of failure

Another individual barrier that emerged was low self-esteem and the fear of failure. Participants often voiced the phrase ‘*Not good enough*’, emanating from two key concerns: an initial apprehension of qualification status amongst the programme’s multidisciplinary team and their peer group, and secondly, based on previous educational experiences.

“I think the biggest challenge for me was the fear of failure and the fear of not accomplishing this with my background in terms of my schooling. I was very much sport orientated and I spent a fair amount of time at sports, maybe not looking at my academics as I should have, and I think the fear of not achieving was probably my biggest stumbling block.” (Participant 9).

9.8.2 Theme 2: Academic

Academic enablers enhance learners' learning experience and positively affect their academic success. Academic barriers are challenges that may impede learning and academic performance.

9.8.2.1 Enablers: Flexibility, value and engagement

Online education offers a degree of flexibility

Despite the demanding schedule, participants mentioned an appreciation for the programme's flexibility. Shifting schedules and revisiting sections provided a sense of control over their learning experience. This flexibility, however, didn't come at the expense of structure. Weekly tasks and checklists ensured all learners stayed on track and met the programme's requirements:

“You just that little bit of freedom to complete the task when you had a chance, and read at your own pace and learn at your pace.” (Participant 7).

“The lectures were filmed and then available for us to view in our own time. We had to keep up with the weekly work, though, but at our own convenience. This was very effective. It meant that we could cover the content in our own time, at our own pace and go back to it if we needed to.” (Participant 5).

Feeling valued within a system

Participants highlighted how they enjoyed engaging with the multidisciplinary team in the programme and felt knowledgeable within their field of expertise. They felt that interactions provided a platform to voice their opinions and actively contribute to discussions, which was essential for their learning and confidence:

“I was able to discuss and interact with the others in a way where my opinion meant something, even if it may have been wrong. I had some good debates with some of the doctors. I felt valued in the group.” (Participant 9).

“And I think after a couple of weeks, we realised we were in the same boat. You could see people were experiencing the same struggles. We were all flourishing in

the same way and quite quickly we all felt we were just colleagues. And not necessarily divided by qualification.” (Participant 5).

9.8.2.2 Barriers: Academic writing, literacy and technology

Academic writing and literacy

For those whose first language is not English or who do not have training in academic writing, expressing complex concepts in written form can be challenging. These challenges were highlighted:

*“The way I used to read a paper and the way I read the paper now is like worlds apart. And then there was the actual academic writing, I struggled with that.”
(Participant 3).*

“English is not my first language so I was slow and had to look up a lot of words. Especially working in rural Africa, there isn’t someone you can just quickly ask for help.” (Participant 4).

Technology

Participants mentioned technology as a barrier with many lacking access to reliable technology, including computers and internet connectivity, and were unable to engage fully with digital learning resources, submit assignments on time, or participate in online discussions until this was solved:

“I had to go and buy a new computer for this course because mine was outdated, and then set it up!” (Participant 3).

“I think the first challenge was in the first three months, and most of the challenges was getting through and understanding of the technology of how this online platform works and how the libraries work, and obviously I think one of my challenges is now having to maintain a different email address, which I never manage to link to mine. So I would miss notifications and announcements.” (Participant 7).

Despite envisioned internet connectivity issues, participants realised this potential barrier and seemed to prepare for it:

“I was the middle of the (rural) and there was literally no (internet) signal. I made sure I always downloaded the work when I had signal” (Participant 8).

9.8.3 Theme three: Institutional

In this study, Institutional enablers encompass an educational organisation’s supportive structures and practices that facilitate learning and success. Conversely, institutional barriers are the systemic obstacles within an educational institution that can hinder learners’ academic journey.

9.8.3.1 Enablers: Institutional support services

Departmental support and programme structure

The support provided within the programme was highlighted amongst participants. They commented on the responsiveness and guidance from the programme convenor and lecturers. Others emphasised how the programme’s structure, clear progression, and logical learning flow contributed significantly to their positive experience.

“The support that the department gave us from the word go, the RPL process then the curriculum they supplied ahead of time class, we were never in the dark with what is needed, they [lecturers] will always offer help. it felt like it was planned out properly. It just flowed week by week...” (Participant 2).

“The tutors played a huge role and it was fantastic because you are able to interact with them and they gave us some really awesome feedback and sometimes it was frustrating to get the feedback we did. But the tutors played a huge role for me.” (Participant 9).

9.8.3.2 Barriers: University culture

Channels of communication

The participants indicated that they used the programme convenor for day-to-day assistance, even beyond academic support.

“I just emailed [programme convenor] for advice and [they] guided me to the right place.” (Participant 1).

“We had a convener, in the beginning I had to email her to direct me to the sort out my problem” (Participant 10).

9.9 Discussion

The transition from vocational to postgraduate education is a considerable leap, presenting specific challenges and support needs.¹³³ The research aimed to understand the support requirements of vocational paramedics during 12 months of postgraduate studies, emphasising identifying barriers and enablers.

Theme one highlighted support as a powerful enabler, emphasising the impact of the RPL pathway. This factor, however, was not recognised as a support strategy in the other literature.^{79,140} Access via RPL provided recognition and legitimacy to their vocational learning, allowing them to bypass traditional academic prerequisites and access postgraduate education.

When considering academic barriers, the participants shared their challenges in developing academic writing and literacy skills, a shift from the practical skillset prioritised in their vocational training. As most had never experienced undergraduate education, learning a new academic language took time, especially for those whose home language was not English. Additionally, while adept at navigating traditional learning environments, these participants encountered difficulties adjusting to digital platforms, indicative of a disconnect between their vocational background and the academic demands they now face and migration to modern-day technology.

The shift to university life presented institutional challenges for participants who said they were unfamiliar with higher education’s norms and support structures. Having engaged primarily with the online aspects of the programme, they lacked the traditional in-person orientation or “First Year Experience” designed to ease students into university life.⁷⁵ Additionally, their predisposition to seek guidance from programme staff rather than dedicated support services aligns with practices from vocational training environments, which often centred around a principal coordinator who addresses any support needs.^{22,144} This pattern suggests a preference for the

familiarity and direct communication offered by the programme convenor, highlighting an opportunity to better integrate broader university support structures.

As RPL continues to integrate into the higher education system due to the NQF, continuous support beyond access becomes vital for those who gain access via this route. Accordingly, higher education institutions should actively offer and promote RPL programmes in line with the national educational agenda. Alongside this access, the development of support mechanisms is critical. Institutions should implement orientation programmes designed to meet the unique requirements of non-traditional learners, leveraging platforms to ensure these programmes are widely accessible.

Universities should develop targeted support services that address the specific academic, technological, and institutional barriers. It is also advisable to increase the visibility and user-friendliness of these support resources, ensuring that RPL candidates are aware of and feel comfortable accessing the help available to them.

9.10 Limitations

The scope of this study focused on vocational paramedics from South Africa and conclusions may not extend to diverse vocational fields or geographic areas. It included a small cohort on one programme, and other programmes may have different support structures and processes in place. Future research should encompass a broader array of vocational disciplines and regions to ensure all challenges can be identified and explored.

9.11 Conclusion

This study aimed to describe the experiences of vocational paramedics during a 12-month postgraduate diploma, focusing on perceived support requirements. By recognising the enablers and barriers, higher education institutions can provide targeted support aimed at overcoming the barriers experienced by those using RPL for access. Ultimately, this approach can benefit all learners and enrich the academic community by embracing the diverse perspectives and experiences that vocational learners bring to the postgraduate landscape.

9.12 Discussion of Section 2

This section presented the culmination of three interlinked studies designed to explore the support needs of vocational paramedics transitioning into postgraduate education, focusing on those enrolled in the PGDip EC programme. Together, these studies provided a balanced view of the challenges and opportunities these learners experience throughout the academic year, offering both practical insights and theoretical connections to existing research. As only RPL candidates were included in the interviews, the findings reflect the perspectives of this group alone. It is possible that traditionally admitted students may have encountered similar challenges, but their experiences were not examined in this study. The results should therefore be understood within the scope of vocational learners entering via RPL.

The first study utilised the HMLSQ to identify the predominant learning styles among the 2021 and 2022 PGDip EC cohorts (Chapter 7). Results provided a clear preference for the Reflector learning style, characterised by thoughtful observation and consideration before taking action.^{28,126} This finding aligns with the structure of the PGDip EC programme, which emphasises reflective practice through guided activities and coursework designed to promote cognitive engagement.^{9,66} Conversely, the Activist style, which thrives on hands-on engagement and immediate application, was the least preferred, despite the context of emergency medicine, where quick thinking, on-the-go action, and hands-on problem-solving are vital competencies.^{13,99}

The second study explored the support needs of vocational paramedics transitioning into postgraduate education using a mixed methodology (Chapter 8). While RPL candidates demonstrated academic competence, with results comparable to those of non-RPL peers, the study highlighted challenges primarily related to technological and institutional support. Difficulties navigating the LMS and accessing formal university support services emerged as recurring barriers. Instead of utilising institutional resources, RPL candidates often relied on the programme convenor for assistance. While reliance on the programme convenor may plausibly reflect patterns from vocational environments where a single coordinator often provides broad support, it may also have been shaped by convenience or the perceived accessibility of the

programme convenor. The interpretation presented here, therefore, highlights a likely vocational influence while recognising that other explanations are possible.^{13, 30}

Aligning these findings with Vygotsky's SCT, the reliance on programme convenors can be understood as an extension of the scaffolding that learners have become accustomed to in vocational settings. Vygotsky emphasised that learning occurs within the ZPD, the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with support.^{30,31} For RPL candidates, the programme convenor may act as an MKO, providing the guidance necessary to navigate unfamiliar academic processes and technologies. This reflects the social and collaborative nature of vocational learning, where mentorship plays a central role in skill acquisition and professional growth.^{30,31} The linkage to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is presented as a heuristic lens rather than a direct equivalence. The intention is to illustrate how participants' reliance on guided support resembles scaffolding within the ZPD.³¹ This should not be read as claiming identical mechanisms between vocational mentorship and academic MKOs, but rather as a useful frame for interpreting how learners experienced support in transition. Further empirical work would be required to examine these processes in more detail.

The continued reliance on informal scaffolding highlights the gap in formal institutional support structures that could otherwise extend learners' ZPD more effectively. Expanding scaffolding strategies to include structured orientation programmes for online learners, technology training, and peer-assisted learning would provide the necessary tools to enable learners to transition more independently into the higher education environment.^{31,39} These enhancements align with Vygotsky's assertion that learning is mediated through social interaction and that structured support fosters cognitive development, ultimately equipping learners to achieve tasks and outcomes previously beyond their reach.^{30,31}

The third study employed reflexive thematic analysis to identify key themes related to the support needs of vocational paramedics transitioning into postgraduate education (Chapter 9). The findings highlighted individual, academic, and institutional barriers and enablers that shaped participants' experiences throughout their academic journey. These themes illustrate the multifaceted nature of support required to facilitate

a smooth transition for vocational learners, aligned with Vygotsky's SCT, which emphasises the inherently social nature of learning and development.³⁰

The first theme, *individual enablers and barriers*, reflects Vygotsky's notion that learning and growth occur through social interactions and shared experiences.³⁰ The RPL candidates' use of peer and familial support highlighted the importance of relationships as enablers in their learning journeys. This social aspect of individual enablers resonates with Vygotsky's assertion that the 'social being' is central to development, where learners rely on interactions with others to make sense of their experiences.² The RPL pathway further aligns with this theory, as it validates learners' accumulated knowledge, which was developed through mentorship, practical collaboration, and years of professional engagement.¹⁰

The *academic barriers* highlighted RPL candidates' challenges when transitioning from practical, skills-based training to theoretical, academically oriented learning. Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD provides a useful lens for understanding this transition.³⁰ RPL candidates struggled with academic writing and digital literacy, both of which required scaffolding to develop the competencies needed to succeed in higher education, especially when undergraduate levels are skipped. Many of the RPL candidates reached out to peers or colleagues to overcome these challenges, which aligns with Vygotsky's view that learners advance when supported by MKO, such as programme staff or peers.^{2,31}

The third theme, *institutional barriers and enablers*, highlighted the programme convenors' role in providing support, mirroring the mentorship culture characteristic of vocational learning environments. In vocational settings, learners often build knowledge through close relationships with mentors, supervisors, or coordinators, who act as primary facilitators of learning.¹ This reliance on programme convenors can be interpreted as scaffolding within the ZPD, where learners require guided support to navigate the complexities of university structures and digital platforms. However, participants' reluctance to engage with broader institutional resources reveals an opportunity to enhance the visibility and accessibility of university support systems.

These findings collectively reflect the interconnected social and cultural elements of Vygotsky's SCT.^{2,94} Individual enablers, such as peer collaboration and familial support, showcase the social dimensions of learning, while academic and institutional barriers highlight the need for scaffolding to extend learners' capabilities within their ZPD.³⁰ The findings of this research align with existing literature in both the medical field and other professional domains, emphasising the need for integrating support services into academic programmes.^{17,22,52} By addressing these challenges and reinforcing the importance of guided learning, universities can better support vocational learners in their transition to postgraduate education.

SECTION 3

Participatory Action Research

CHAPTER 10: Participatory Action Research

In Chapter 10, PAR is introduced and explained, followed by an overview of the three iterative cycles conducted in this research. Each cycle was designed to progressively build upon the insights and findings from the previous one, ensuring an evolving and adaptive approach. The first PAR cycle was informed by the research findings outlined in Section Two, which considered progression and the lived experiences of RPL candidates on the PGDip EC 2021. Cycle one focused on addressing the support needs of these learners, with particular emphasis on enhancing mechanisms available to RPL candidates in the PGDip EC. The subsequent cycles built on the outcomes of Cycle One, extending and refining these strategies in response to emerging insights and ongoing feedback.

10.1 Overview of Participatory Action Research

PAR is a collaborative research approach that actively involves participants in the process of examining and addressing their own community or workplace issues.^{144,145} Emerging in the mid-20th century, PAR has its roots in the work of Kurt Lewin, who emphasised the role of action research in promoting social equity and empowerment through reflective cycles of planning, action, and evaluation.¹⁴⁷ Lewin's theory emphasised the importance of involving community members in the research process, proposing a cyclic method of planning, taking action, and fact-finding about the result of the action.^{148,149}

PAR is characterised by its focus on reflection, data collection, and action to improve strategies, practices, and knowledge of the environments in which participants are directly involved.^{5,145} PAR is distinct in its iterative process, and cycles of action and reflection thus gradually increase understanding among participant researchers.^{146,150} The collaborative nature of PAR helps to break down the traditional barriers between researchers and subjects, fostering a co-creative environment where knowledge is not merely extracted but jointly constructed.^{151,152} Through this approach, participants become empowered as active agents in the research process, contributing to meaningful, context-specific outcomes that reflect their lived realities.

10.2 Theoretical Foundations of PAR

The theoretical underpinnings of PAR are rooted in constructivist and sociocultural theories, closely aligning with Vygotsky's principles.^{95,147,150} Constructivism is a learning theory that posits knowledge is actively constructed by individuals rather than passively absorbed. According to this perspective, learners engage with their environment and prior knowledge to make sense of new experiences, thereby creating meaning.^{2,147} Constructivism emphasises the importance of learners' active involvement in the learning process, recognising that meaning-making is both a personal and social endeavour.

A core principle of constructivism is cultural mediation, a concept central to Vygotsky's SCT. Vygotsky argued that all learning occurs within a cultural context and is mediated through shared tools, rules and community.^{2,31} Cultural mediation acknowledges that individuals do not learn in isolation; rather, they engage with and are shaped by their social and cultural surroundings. Culture can be understood to include the institutional culture of the university, which influences how learners adapt to academic expectations, access support, and integrate into the postgraduate environment. This view aligns with PAR's emphasis on collective inquiry, as participants interact and draw upon cultural tools to address shared issues and construct meaningful solutions within their context.²

Active social engagement, another key tenet of SCT, refers to the process through which individuals learn by interacting with others within a community of practice.^{2,30} Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD highlights MKOs' role in supporting learners to achieve tasks they cannot accomplish alone.³⁰ Through guidance, collaboration, and shared experiences, learners are able to reach higher levels of understanding and skill development. In the context of PAR, active social engagement manifests as a collaborative effort where researchers and participants work together to identify problems, share knowledge, and co-create solutions. This dynamic process enhances learning and empowers participants to act on their findings to create meaningful change.^{31,150}

The active social engagement approach leverages the transformative potential of collaboration and active participation by grounding PAR in constructivist and sociocultural principles. By ensuring that knowledge is co-constructed through shared inquiry and cultural mediation, this theory promotes both individual and collective growth within specific social contexts.^{31,150}

This study employed an action research methodology to facilitate cycles of change through iterative phases. Data collected from the mixed-methods studies (Chapters 8 and 9) served as the foundation for implementing the PAR approach. Three action research cycles were conducted to address RPL candidates' support requirements in postgraduate emergency care programmes.

PAR was selected for its ability to actively engage vocational learners and educators in a collaborative, transformative process.¹⁵⁰ One of the aims of this research was to develop a conceptual framework of support to aid vocationally trained learners transitioning into postgraduate studies in emergency medicine. Given the barriers and enablers identified in Study 2 (Chapters 4, 8 and 9), PAR provided an ideal method for directly involving these learners in identifying their specific support needs and collaboratively developing strategies to address them.¹⁵²⁻¹⁵⁴

Craig Mertler's PAR approach was chosen for its systematic yet flexible methodology, which incorporates clear phases of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.¹⁵⁵⁻¹⁵⁷ Mertler's emphasis on practical application allows findings to be translated into actionable solutions within learners' educational environments.⁵

10.3 Craig Mertler and PAR

Craig Mertler's work equips educators and researchers with practical tools to improve classroom practices and foster learner success through systematic inquiry and reflection.^{5,158} His approach aligns with constructivist principles, emphasising that learning is an active, collaborative process where individuals construct knowledge through experience and social interaction.^{2,31} This made Mertler's PAR approach particularly well-suited to this research, as it provided a structured, iterative method for engaging participants in identifying and addressing their support needs.

The four phases of Mertler's PAR include planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.⁵ These phases are not isolated; rather, they are iterative and often overlap, enabling continuous refinements and adaptations to actions based on the data and insights gathered throughout the process. This cyclical nature ensures that each phase builds upon the previous one, fostering a deeper understanding of the issues being addressed and enabling practical, responsive solutions.⁵ These phases are further discussed in the article titled: *Participatory Action Research in Emergency Care Education: an Indirect Approach to Learner Support* (Chapter 11).

Although RPL candidates were involved in the research, they were not the primary contributors to the design of the PAR cycles. Their engagement was limited to interviews and questionnaires, which ensured that whilst the research remained embedded in their lived experience, they were able to focus on their studies rather than the research. As discussed in Chapter 6, this selective involvement reflected a deliberate methodological choice, shaped by the time-intensive nature of participatory design and a commitment to ethical practice. The decision to exclude RPL candidates from the core design process was also informed by their heightened vulnerability as learners who had never previously engaged with higher education. All learners in higher education can be considered vulnerable. This vulnerability may arise from the academic demands they face, the unequal power relations between researchers and learners, and the potential for exploitation within educational settings.¹⁰⁶ It is assumed that RPL candidates face additional challenges compared with peers who have progressed through traditional undergraduate study, as they often lack prior exposure to university culture and academic conventions. To avoid overburdening this cohort, the action research cycles were developed and refined primarily through the involvement of institutional stakeholders, such as tutors and academic staff.^{10,11,130}

This approach aligns with emerging recognition of indirect participation in PAR, where institutional actors reflect and act on behalf of learner groups.^{155,157} Such methods are increasingly validated in educational contexts where learners are constrained in their capacity to engage directly.¹⁴⁶ Mertler affirms that educators, administrators, or academic staff may be well-positioned to act as co-researchers in the PAR process, particularly when embedded in the learning environment and able to drive iterative

improvements.¹⁵⁹ This adaptation maintains the integrity of the reflective cycle central to PAR while upholding ethical standards and safeguarding participant well-being.^{160,161}

This indirect model of participation aligns with broader national and institutional commitments to equity and redress. RPL candidates, whose prior educational trajectories were often interrupted or undervalued, require forms of support that acknowledge structural disadvantage while avoiding new exclusions under the guise of participation.^{12,58,110} Literature on RPL and adult learning reinforces this, cautioning that well-intentioned participatory frameworks can inadvertently reinforce inequalities if they impose additional burdens on already marginalised learners.^{21,130} By framing participants beyond learners as co-researchers and change agents, the research preserved the participatory ethos of PAR while remaining ethically and contextually appropriate.

CHAPTER 11: Participatory Action Research in Emergency Care Education: an Indirect Approach to Learner Support

This article is currently under review with the Journal of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa

Declaration from author and co-authors

The following co-author contributed to the publication: Cunningham, C.

The authors confirm their contribution to the paper as follows: DG and CC: study conception and design, draft manuscript preparation. DG: Data collection and draft manuscript preparation. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

The extent of each person's contributions follows:

- DG: 60%
- CC: 40%

The headings and citation numbers have been updated to align with the body of the thesis; the content remains as per publication.

Debbi Groome

10 February 2025



Charmaine Cunningham

10 February 2025



11.1 Abstract

11.1.1 Background

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative methodology that uses cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection to link inquiry with action. This study examined whether a moderated, indirect participatory approach could capture learner support needs without imposing additional workload and cognitive burden. The research was situated within Recognition of Prior Learning as a pathway into postgraduate emergency care education in South Africa, where little methodological precedent exists for engaging vocational learners.

11.1.2 Methods

The study focuses on one PAR cycle, using Mertler's four-phase action research approach as a methodological scaffold.

11.1.3 Results

The three cycles illustrated how indirect PAR can be adapted to postgraduate contexts through involvement at key choice points. Cycle 1 saw the formation of a structured tutor group. Cycle 2 generated a Tutor–Student Charter, formalising boundaries and expectations as a methodological artefact that safeguarded both tutor capacity and learner access. In Cycle 3, short questionnaires demonstrated that direct participation could be incorporated without creating additional burden.

11.1.4 Conclusion

The study demonstrated that PAR can be applied as an adaptive methodology in postgraduate education by moderating participation according to learner readiness and context, confirming its flexibility and rigour across diverse disciplinary and institutional settings.

11.1.5 Contribution

The study demonstrated a constructivist-aligned model of PAR for higher education. It offered a transferable approach for programmes serving learners with competing demands, showing how choice points, mentoring structures, and time-conscious

methods can embed learner perspectives into programme development without imposing undue burden.

11.2 Introduction

Participatory Action Research (PAR) has become a well-suited methodological approach in education and the social sciences, recognised for its emphasis on collaboration, reflexivity, and responsiveness. Its origins are often attributed to Kurt Lewin, whose work in the 1940s conceptualised action research as an iterative cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in order to address pressing social problems.^{147,148} Lewin's vision was anchored in the belief that research should not be a detached process but an instrument for social transformation, linking knowledge generation directly to action. This early formulation provided the foundation for later approaches that placed participants at the centre of inquiry, ensuring that research outcomes were meaningful and connected to lived experience.¹⁵³

Building on Lewin, subsequent theorists framed PAR as a critical and democratic methodology that seeks to challenge dominant structures and open space for shared voice.¹⁴⁶ Later interpretations describe PAR as both a process and a philosophy of practice, with its strength lying in collective knowledge creation and social reform.¹⁴⁵ The cyclical and reflexive nature of action research has been highlighted as particularly suitable in education, where contexts and learner needs evolve rapidly.¹⁶⁰ Within this tradition, Mertler introduced a structured framework comprising four stages; planning, acting, developing, and reflecting. His model illustrates how PAR can be applied in a systematic yet adaptable manner, ensuring both rigour and responsiveness. This orientation made it particularly suitable for studies addressing learner transitions and institutional change.^{5,155,157,158}

In educational research, PAR has been used to reframe learners as active contributors rather than passive recipients of knowledge.¹⁵¹ Learner voice initiatives show that learners can influence teaching, curricula, and institutional practice. In postgraduate settings, PAR has been used to create collaborative spaces where learners shape academic processes, positioning them as co-constructors of knowledge.¹⁴⁹

This participatory orientation resonates strongly with social constructivist perspectives, which view learning as socially mediated and situated within cultural and institutional contexts.^{2,30} Knowledge is constructed through shared processes rather than transmitted from teacher to learner. PAR reflects this principle by creating research structures in which meaning is co-constructed through collective inquiry, with learners' experiences becoming cultural tools that enable institutional learning and transformation.

Indirect PAR extends this alignment by recognising that mediation can occur through proxies as well as through direct involvement. These proxies can act as intermediaries who surface and interpret learner experiences at defined points, enabling those perspectives to guide institutional change without overburdening learners. This reflects the logic of scaffolding, where responsibility for articulation is temporarily distributed in order to protect and support learners.¹¹ In this way, indirect PAR demonstrates that constructivist principles can be enacted flexibly, ensuring that learner perspectives are represented even when direct participation is limited.

Additionally, higher education contexts often involve groups of learners who experience vulnerability in distinct ways. Working adults re-entering education also face barriers of time, finances, and competing responsibilities, challenges that can be amplified in postgraduate contexts.¹⁰⁶ Disadvantaged learners often describe their experiences in terms of isolation, exclusion, and disconnection from academic communities, highlighting that vulnerability is not only economic but also social and institutional.¹⁶

In these circumstances, full and continuous engagement may not be feasible. Studies caution that learners balancing employment and study may find participatory methods an additional strain.¹⁰⁴ It is further emphasised that while involvement is empowering, action research must be designed in ways that protect wellbeing and autonomy.¹⁷¹ These arguments underscore a central methodological tension: PAR aims to democratise knowledge, yet if applied uncritically, it can inadvertently reproduce inequality or disempower the very groups it seeks to support.

Indirect PAR has emerged as a methodological response to these challenges. By introducing participation through carefully chosen "choice points," indirect approaches

enable learners' perspectives to inform inquiry without demanding continuous involvement.¹⁶⁷ Mediation through tutors, mentors, or convenors ensures that authentic learner voices shape institutional processes while protecting learners from the risk of exploitation or academic overload. In this sense, indirect PAR is both a pragmatic compromise and an adaptation in participation, showing how protection from undue burden can become a defining principle of participatory practice.

This interpretation also broadens how participatory research is understood. PAR can be seen not as a rigid standard of full and direct involvement but as a spectrum of possible practices that can be tailored to context.¹⁷⁰ Indirect approaches exemplify this spectrum by showing that moderated involvement can coexist with agency, voice, and collaboration. Even with reduced intensity, participants can still influence agendas, shape institutional reflection, and contribute to social transformation. While intensity of engagement is reduced, the core ethos of PAR is retained: participants influence the research agenda, shape institutional reflection, and contribute to social transformation.

The methodological value of indirect PAR extends across higher education settings where learners face multiple vulnerabilities. International learners dealing with cultural and linguistic barriers, first-generation learners negotiating unfamiliar academic terrain, vocational graduates adjusting to new modes of knowledge, and learners with financial or social constraints may all benefit from this approach.^{23,106} Moreover, by carefully balancing involvement, indirect PAR helps to mitigate subtle power imbalances that often exist between researchers and participants, ensuring that learner agency is acknowledged without creating additional demands.^{41,165}

This article contributes methodological conversation by exploring the use of indirect PAR in a post-graduate diploma at a higher educational institution. In this instance, it was demonstrated that indirect PAR can preserve participatory values, reduce burden on learners, and provide transferable insights for supporting diverse learner populations in higher education.

11.3 Research Methods and Design

11.3.1 Study Design

on a broader research project which explored the support needs of vocational paramedics transitioning into postgraduate education, an area that remains underexplored in both South African and international discourse.^{12,22} The design followed the cyclical framework of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting as outlined in Mertler's work on educational action research (figure 13).⁵ In the first two cycles, PAR was adapted into an indirect model to minimise potential disruption to learners' academic progress.

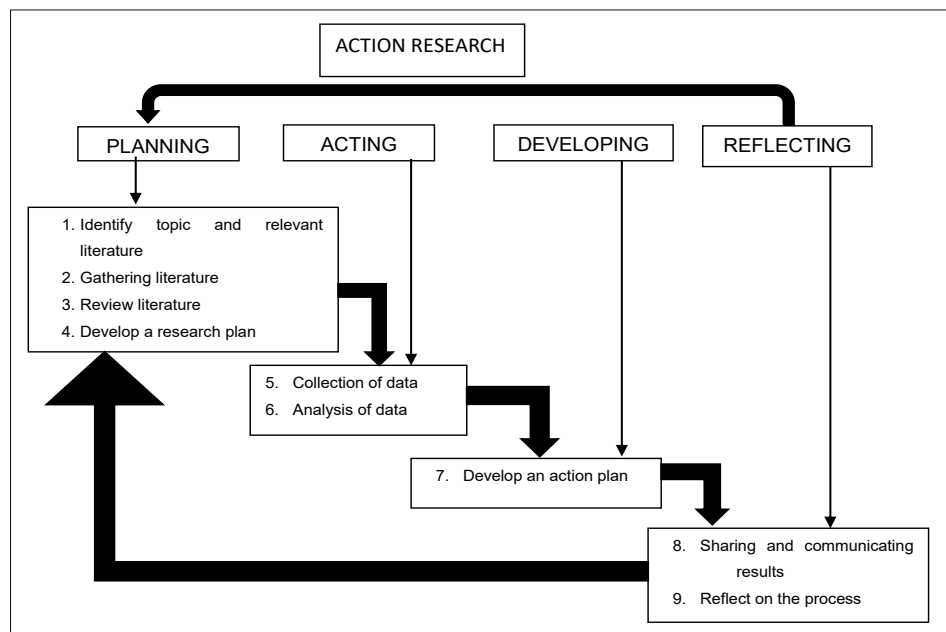


Figure 13: Stages and Steps in Action Research (Adapted from Mertler)

The indirect approach was implemented through two iterative cycles:

- **Cycle 1: Formation of the tutor group.** Tutors were introduced to the research aims and engaged in collaborative discussions to identify potential challenges facing the learner cohort. This cycle established the group as the primary site of participation and created a foundation for mediated reflection.
- **Cycle 2: Development of a tutor charter.** Tutors co-constructed a charter that outlined boundaries, expectations, and strategies for engagement. This artefact

acted as a safeguard against over-involvement and clarified the responsibilities of tutors as mediators of learner experience.

The last cycle used direct PAR:

- **Cycle 3: Progression and lifelong learning.** Questionnaires were directed at both current learners and recent graduates to evaluate progression and the potential for lifelong learning.

11.3.2 Setting

The study was conducted within the Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care (PGDip EC) at a South African university. Delivered fully online, the programme enrolled learners from diverse geographical regions and professional contexts across the South African emergency medical services. The broader research project centred on the support needs of vocational paramedics who accessed the programme through the Recognition of Prior Learning pathway, positioning them as the primary focus of the study. Postgraduate study is academically demanding, and these learners were expected to encounter additional challenges as they entered directly at this level without the undergraduate preparation that often facilitates transition. To help address this, tutors were engaged to provide structured support, forming part of the educational environment in which the participatory action research cycles were conducted.

11.3.3 Study Population and Sampling Strategy

The study population included learners enrolled in the PGDip EC, tutors, and the programme convenor between 2021 and 2023. Inclusion criteria comprised all learners registered in the PGDip EC during this period, tutors supporting the cohorts, and the programme convenor.

Once permissions were obtained, potential participants were emailed by the researcher providing information about the research, and if they were interested in participating, further engagement followed. Exclusion criteria applied to individuals not enrolled in the PGDip EC and those not engaged in tutor or convenor roles.

Participation was structured across three indirect PAR cycles, each employing a sampling strategy suited to its purpose:

Cycle 1: Purposive inclusion of all learners in the PGDip EC cohort, their tutors, and the programme convenor to capture a comprehensive view of early transition experiences.

Cycle 2: Purposive and criterion-based sampling of all learners in the PGDip EC cohort, tutors, four graduate tutors from the 2021 cohort (introduced in Cycle 1 to strengthen peer-led insight), and the programme convenor.

Cycle 3: Purposive sampling of all learners in the PGDip EC cohort, graduates of the preceding cohort, and the programme convenor, enabling reflection across both current and past programme participants.

Once permissions were obtained, potential participants were emailed by the researcher providing information about the research, and if they were interested in participating, further engagement followed.

This inclusive approach reduced the risk of reinforcing perceptions of vulnerability and ensured that reflections were situated within the collective cohort experience rather than isolating RPL learners as a distinct subgroup.

11.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Cape Town (041/2022 and 042/2022). Institutional permission was also obtained from the Department of Learner Affairs. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were advised that participation was voluntary, withdrawal was possible at any stage without penalty, and that all responses would remain anonymous. Participation had no impact on learners' academic progression or future involvement in the programme.

11.5 Results

This section provides an overview of the three PAR cycles, with an emphasis on methodological application rather than on detailed empirical findings. Guided by Mertler's four-phase framework, the cycles illustrate how indirect participation was operationalised in this study. Each cycle highlights calibrated "choice points" where

learner involvement was mediated, ensuring that perspectives were included without increasing learner burden.¹⁶⁷

11.5.1 Cycle 1: Establishing a tutor support group

Planning stage

As learners in higher education are considered vulnerable, those entering the PGDip EC through the RPL pathway could be regarded as even more so, as many had not previously undertaken undergraduate study. To reduce the potential burden during their year, an indirect PAR approach was selected, with findings mediated through tutors and the programme convenor rather than through direct learner participation.

During the planning stage, an action plan was developed as outlined in Figure 14. This was valuable in providing a structured roadmap for addressing the identified support gap through the establishment of a tutor group. The plan was framed using the SMART approach, which ensured that objectives were specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound, thereby enabling systematic monitoring and reflection within the cycle.

Participatory Action Plan Cycle 1 Tutors as Support	
1. Problem or gap identified	2. Cause analysis
1. RPL candidates require institutional support. 2. They do not know who or where to go for support. 3. Lean on Department to answer all areas of need	1. They did not study in an university environment 2. One educator typically lead a class in all areas, including teaching, financial, emotional support 3. Possible lack of physical orientation to the university
3. Action Plan	4. Implementation process
<p>Specific – Establish a Tutor Support Programme where learners are assigned to tutors for mentorship on PGDip EC 2022</p> <p>Measurable – Monitor interactions between tutors and learners on the Tutor WhatsApp group to identify common areas of need and assess the effectiveness of the support provided.</p> <p>Achievable – Launch the Tutor Support Programme at the start of the 2022 academic year, ensuring that each incoming learner is paired with a tutor. Tutors will provide guidance and support throughout the programme, integrating mentorship into the learner journey.</p> <p>Realistic – Provide an additional layer of support to PGDip EC learners</p> <p>Timely– Implement the Tutor Support Programme to be operational by the next academic intake (PGDip EC 2022).</p>	<p>What? Tutor Support Programme where PGDip EC 2021 graduates are assigned as tutors to mentor all incoming students on PGDip EC 2022</p> <p>Who? Program convener, tutors, researcher</p> <p>How? Discussion with suggestion of tutor programme Send out invitation to PGDip EC 2021 graduates to gauge interest</p>
5. Evaluation plan	
1. A Tutor Programme	
Progress: date	Comment
03112021	Conception of tutor programme
12012022	Invitation to all PGDip 2021 graduates
30022022	Reflection

Figure 14: Action Plan for Cycle One

Acting stage

During this stage, engagement took place with tutors and the programme convenor, who represented learner perspectives and guided the initial steps of the support strategy. Structured discussions were held to identify areas where learners might require assistance, and these inputs were documented to ensure that the objectives set during the planning stage could be actioned in practice. The process was further informed by insights from the literature review conducted in the broader research

project, which provided an evidence-based perspective to complement the tutor and convenor contributions.

Developing stage

During the developing stage, all graduates from the 2021 cohort were contacted by the programme convenor via email and offered the opportunity to join the tutor group. Although only four graduates expressed willingness to participate, their inclusion expanded the tutor group and increased its capacity to provide structured support for the incoming cohort.

Reflecting stage

The cycle confirmed that the use of indirect PAR, combined with a SMART framework, enabled actionable changes to be made while minimising the burden on learners.

11.5.2 Cycle 2: Establishing a charter for boundaries

Planning stage

This cycle was informed by semi-structured discussions with the tutor group established in Cycle 1. Feedback indicated recurring challenges in learner–tutor interactions, including expectations for constant availability and requests for support beyond academic guidance. The planning process consisted of multiple steps, as outlined in Figure 15, which provided the foundation for subsequent actions.

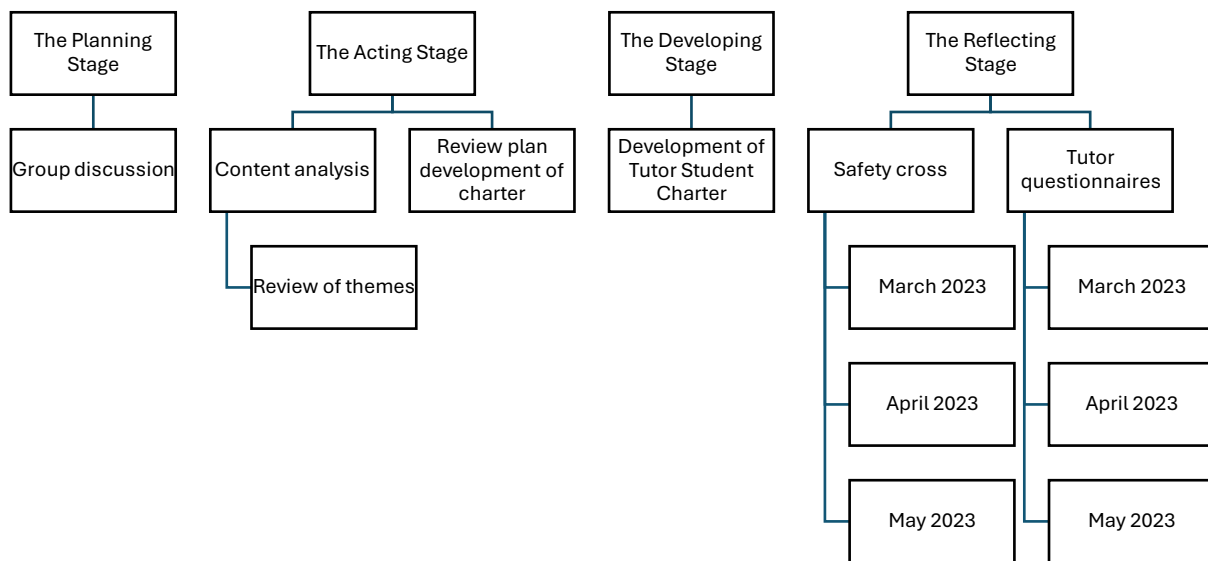


Figure 15: PAR Cycle Two Process

Acting Stage

During this stage, the group discussions were analysed, and it was determined that the main challenges centred on learner expectations for constant availability and requests for non-academic support. Further discussions were held with the programme convenor, and it was agreed that a charter would be an appropriate mechanism to establish boundaries. It was decided that the charter should be developed by the tutors to suit their individual availability.

Developing Stage

Tutors collaboratively drafted a charter that formalised expectations for communication and clarified the scope of tutor support. Each tutor was able to record their availability within the charter and distribute it to their allocated learner group.

Reflecting stage

During the reflecting stage, data were collected to evaluate the efficiency of the charter through two methods: an adapted safety cross tool and three monthly tutor questionnaires. The safety cross provided a visual record of WhatsApp communication patterns, capturing frequency, timing, and type of interactions between tutors and learners. This enabled systematic monitoring of boundary adherence and highlighted

variations in communication across different time points. The tutor questionnaires, generated structured feedback on the usefulness of the charter, challenges in its enforcement, and learner adherence to agreed communication boundaries.

11.5.3 Cycle 3: Exploring progression and lifelong learning

By the time the third cycle was initiated, earlier cycles had shown that vocational learners in the cohort did not require the level of academic support that had originally been envisaged. The focus then shifted to whether access through RPL had supported progression and fostered engagement with lifelong learning. Based on this learning, it was decided that learners could be approached directly, but through low-burden methods, to ensure their perspectives were captured without compromising their studies.

Planning stage

To determine progression and lifelong learning, the planning stage involved the design of two short online questionnaires: one distributed to current learners to explore their use of institutional support services, and another to recent graduates to capture experiences of progression into further study or professional development. At this point, questionnaires were chosen over interviews as they provided a mechanism to gather perspectives efficiently while minimising the time and cognitive load of participants, who were already balancing academic and professional responsibilities.

Acting stage

The questionnaires were distributed electronically to the 2023 cohort and to recent graduates, and responses were collected for analysis.

Developing stage

The responses were consolidated and analysed thematically, using a structured process to group data into categories that reflected patterns of support use, progression, and engagement with lifelong learning. The results were then considered alongside the findings from Cycles 1 and 2, as well as the literature review undertaken in the broader research project. Together, these data sources informed the development of a conceptual framework for learner support, which constituted the final component of the broader research project

Reflecting stage

Once it became clear that vocational learners were coping academically, direct participation could be incorporated without compromising their progress. The use of short questionnaires represented a methodological adjustment, providing a low-burden tool to capture learner perspectives while respecting their limited availability and competing responsibilities. This cycle demonstrated that PAR functioned as an adaptive approach, shifting between mediated and direct forms of engagement in response to context and learner needs.

11.6 Synthesis across PAR cycles

The three cycles illustrate how PAR was adapted in one context through careful calibration at key choice points. In Cycle 1, learner perspectives were represented indirectly through alumni who joined the tutor group, showing that proxies can be used to carry forward learner voice while protecting current learners from additional demands. In Cycle 2, mediated dialogue with tutors was formalised into the charter, demonstrating how indirect engagement can be converted into structured artefacts that safeguard both tutor capacity and learner access. By Cycle 3, it had become clear that vocational learners were coping academically, and the methodology was adapted to permit direct participation through short questionnaires. This selective shift showed that once the risk of overburdening learners had lessened, appropriate direct methods, such as short questionnaires, could be introduced to capture progression and lifelong learning.

Across the three cycles, PAR was not implemented as a rigid framework but as an adaptive approach capable of shifting between indirect and direct forms of engagement depending on learner needs and ethical considerations. The iterative use of choice points ensured that learner perspectives informed programme reflection and development in ways that balanced empowerment with protection. Methodologically, the cycles highlight that alumni can act as effective mediators, tutors can take on mentoring roles, and direct participation can be incorporated when context allows. Together, these findings confirm the flexibility of PAR as a methodology in this research, particularly when working with cohorts that may be considered vulnerable.

11.7 Discussion

This study applied PAR to explore the support needs of vocational paramedics who used RPL for access into postgraduate study. Postgraduate education is demanding, and vocational learners were assumed to face additional challenges, having entered directly at this level without the undergraduate preparation that typically eases transition.^{14,22,39,86} To protect these learners from the additional burden of research participation, an indirect approach was initially adopted.

Indirect participation was central in the first two cycles, where learner perspectives were mediated through alumni, tutors, and the programme convenor. This approach allowed support needs to be surfaced and addressed without requiring learners to act as co-researchers during a period of significant adjustment. By the third cycle, however, it had become clear that learners were coping academically, and the method adapted to allow direct participation through short, low-burden questionnaires. This shift expanded the focus from immediate programme support to broader questions of progression and lifelong learning.

Across the three cycles, PAR was therefore used to establish a tutor support group, co-construct a charter, and explore progression and lifelong learning. The findings illustrate that indirect participation can preserve the ethos of PAR when carefully calibrated at methodological choice points, and that direct participation can be introduced once the ethical risks of overburdening learners are reduced. Together, the cycles highlight the methodological flexibility of PAR, its ethical sensitivity to learner vulnerability, and its alignment with constructivist perspectives where mentoring and mediation play a central role in enabling learning and institutional change.

Four key findings emerged from the application of PAR across the three cycles:

1. Flexibility and reflexivity

PAR proved inherently dynamic, requiring responsiveness to both context and learner needs. Flexibility was evident in the decision to employ indirect participation in Cycles 1 and 2, where learner perspectives were mediated through alumni, tutors, and the programme convenor, before adapting in Cycle 3 to allow direct participation through

low-burden questionnaires once it was clear that learners were coping academically. Reflexivity was critical in evaluating these choice points, ensuring that decisions about participation were continually aligned with ethical considerations and learner readiness. This supports existing literature that identifies PAR as cyclical and adaptive and extends it by showing that flexibility applies not only to the sequence of actions but also to the structuring of participation itself.^{5,155,157,158}

2. Context matters

The study reinforced that participation must be situated within the lived realities of learners. Vocational paramedics who entered through RPL were adapting to postgraduate study without prior exposure to university culture, while also navigating the demands of an intensive, fully online programme. Directly involving them as co-researchers during this perceived vulnerable period may risked undermining their academic focus. Indirect strategies, such as expanding the tutor group in Cycle 1 and co-constructing the charter in Cycle 2, ensured that learner needs shaped programme reflection without creating additional strain. By Cycle 3, when learners had demonstrated academic competence, direct participation was introduced. These methodological choices confirm that PAR must remain sensitive to context and cannot be applied in a standardised or mechanical way.¹⁰⁴

3. Time management

Sustaining iterative cycles required careful management of time and workload for both participants and researchers. Indirect participation offered a way to respect learners' limited availability while still embedding their perspectives in programme-level reflection. This was evident in Cycle 1, where alumni mediated learner perspectives, and in Cycle 2, where tutors formalised boundaries through the charter. By Cycle 3, the use of short questionnaires demonstrated that direct methods could also be employed without placing undue burden on participants. These decisions highlight that time management is not peripheral but central to the success of PAR in higher education, supporting calls for researchers to pay closer attention to the temporal organisation of participatory cycles and the distribution of workload across all stakeholders.¹⁶⁰

4. Bridging theory and practice

A central strength of PAR lies in its ability to connect theoretical reflection with practical action. In this study, learner experiences were acknowledged and mediated into structural interventions that reshaped the programme. The expansion of the tutor group created sustained peer support, the charter clarified boundaries and expectations, and questionnaires captured progression needs to inform future planning. These outcomes illustrate how participatory reflection, even when mediated indirectly, can generate tangible change at programme level. Tutors, though formally designated as tutors, acted in practice as mentors who mediated both academic and personal aspects of learner adjustment. Methodologically, the study demonstrated that PAR, including its indirect application, can move beyond surface consultation to embed learner perspectives into institutional practice, thereby embodying its democratic intent to foster meaningful change.¹⁴⁶

11.8 Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this study lie in its iterative design, methodological reflexivity, and adaptability. Learner perspectives were central throughout, yet their academic workload was respected by calibrating involvement. However, limitations remain. Learners were not engaged as co-researchers at every stage, which may have constrained opportunities for deeper collaborative inquiry. The focus on a single programme and disciplinary context limits transferability to other settings. In addition, while indirect approaches reduced learner burden, they risked narrowing opportunities for collective deliberation and richer data generation.

11.9 The Reflecting Stage

The reflecting stage in PAR is vital for assessing the impact and efficacy of the implemented action plan – here, the Tutor Support Programme. It is a period of introspection and evaluation aimed at gathering comprehensive feedback to inform future cycles of action.⁵ Two months after the PGDip EC 2022 programme began, tutors were sent three online questionnaires at one-month intervals. These questionnaires aimed to collect the tutors' perspectives on the challenges and achievements they encountered in their support roles. These questionnaires provided

data points for reflection on the tutors' perspectives. Notably, recurring feedback highlighted through the questionnaires was the issue of candidates making contact outside of workable hours, indicating a need for more explicit boundaries and expectations. This feedback influenced the ensuing PAR cycle, prompting the creation of a Tutor Student Charter designed to establish clear guidelines on acceptable communication practices.

11.10 Implications and Recommendations

The study offers implications for both methodology and practice. Methodologically, it shows how indirect PAR was used as a viable strategy in a higher education context ensuring that their voices influence change while minimising strain. Practically, it highlights that indirect PAR can generate support mechanisms that address transition needs in ways adaptable to different learner populations, including those entering via RPL. Future research should test indirect PAR across diverse programmes and sectors to examine the sustained impact of interventions on learner progression and lifelong learning.

11.11 Limitations

The potential interplay of power and positionality between participants and the researcher was recognised and mitigated through intentional inclusivity as a core strategy throughout the PAR cycles. A second limitation of this research is its focus on a single programme offering. By concentrating on vocational practitioners in emergency care, the study may not capture the varied experiences and challenges of other RPL candidates in other fields when transitioning to the postgraduate environment. This limitation suggests additional research to understand the diverse educational landscapes fully.

11.12 Conclusion

These findings demonstrate that PAR can be applied flexibly along a spectrum of participation, shifting between indirect and direct approaches depending on learner needs and ethical considerations. Indirect participation in the early cycles preserved

the democratic ethos of PAR while protecting vocational learners from additional burden during their transition into postgraduate study. By the third cycle, once it became clear that learners were coping academically, direct participation through low-burden questionnaires was practically viable. Overall, this progression demonstrates PAR as an adaptive methodology, capable of balancing empowerment with protection, rather than a fixed model requiring continuous co-researcher engagement. The study therefore contributes methodologically by illustrating how choice points, contextual sensitivity, time management, and mentoring relationships can be mobilised to embed learner perspectives into research while safeguarding learner wellbeing

11.13 Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the contributions of the PGDip EC tutors and learners who participated in this research, as well as the programme convenor for their collaboration during the research.

CHAPTER 12: Participatory Action Research Cycle One – the Tutor Group

12.1 Background

At the beginning of the 2021 PGDip EC, two tutors were introduced to assist learners, with an initial emphasis on those admitted through RPL. These tutors were both suitably qualified and available to support learners should they require additional assistance. All learners were informed of the tutors' availability, and their engagement with the tutors remained voluntary. Additionally, the programme convener facilitated connections with the tutors for learners identified as struggling. While initially aimed at supporting RPL learners, it became evident that other learners also benefited from this additional layer of support.

Towards the end of the 2021 PGDip EC, some graduates expressed an interest in remaining involved with the programme. The programme convener consequently recognised an opportunity to enhance learner support. Mentoring programmes, particularly in postgraduate education, are well-documented for their ability to enhance academic outcomes, foster learner engagement, and provide essential scaffolding for underrepresented groups.²² This led to the initiation of PAR cycle one, focusing on the development of a structured tutor group.

12.2 Methods

Cycle one employed a PAR approach to develop a tutor group, following Mertler's four-phase action research framework and integrating the nine steps of an action cycle as a methodological scaffold for the study (Figure 13).⁵ Rooted in social constructivism, PAR positions participants as co-researchers, empowering them to enact meaningful change within their context.⁵ Although PAR typically involves direct engagement with participants, this study adopted an indirect approach to mitigate potential interference with the PGDip EC learners' academic year.^{149,150,153,170} In this cycle, indirect PAR was operationalised by focusing on the tutors, who included graduates from the 2021

PGDip EC cohort, and who acted as a mediated voice of the learners within programme-level dialogue.

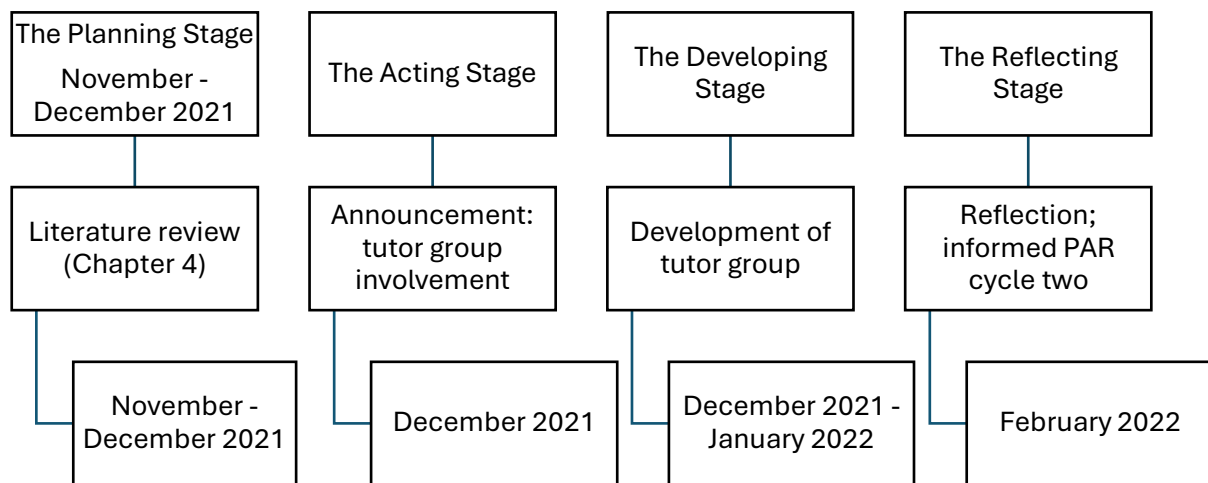


Figure 16: PAR Cycle One Process

Figure 16 displays the four stages of the first cycle, which ran between November 2021 and February 2022. All PGDip EC learners who graduated in 2021 (RPL and non-RPL) were included in this cycle.

12.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approvals were obtained, as illustrated under heading 6.4.

12.4 Ethical Concerns

PAR introduces ethical considerations beyond those associated with traditional research methodologies.¹⁷⁰ As a collaborative and iterative process, PAR positions participants as co-researchers, which requires careful attention to issues such as power dynamics, shared ownership of data, and equitable participation.¹⁵³

PAR cycle one focused on the development of a tutor group, with no data collection taking place during this cycle. All ethical considerations outlined in Chapter 6 were adhered to, with the following additions specific to the PAR cycle:

12.4.1 Credibility

Open communication between tutors, the programme convener, and the head tutor was encouraged to ensure transparency and collaboration. All tutors were informed about the research objectives and their roles in its progression, creating a supportive and cooperative environment. Importantly, participation in the tutor group and the research process was entirely voluntary.^{111,172}

12.4.2 Dependability

The tutor support programme was initiated after the PGDip EC's completion in 2021. This timing ensured that the process took place outside the academic year, minimising potential power dynamics between the research team and learners.^{111,172}

12.4.3 Integrity

Tutors were fully informed about the research objectives to ensure they understood the study's purpose. All tutors voluntarily agreed to engage as the research evolved. Participants were assured that their details would remain anonymised throughout the research process, safeguarding their privacy. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. No remuneration was provided to tutors for their participation in this research.^{111,172}

12.4.4 Accountability and reflexivity

The researcher maintained accountability by ensuring clear communication with the tutors. She kept a reflexive journal to document ongoing reflections, identify potential biases, and monitor the research process. This reflective practice ensured that the integrity of the research was upheld.¹⁷²

Following Mertler's PAR approach, as portrayed in Figure 13, the tutor group's development is outlined through the four stages of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting.⁵

12.5 The Planning Stage

At the end of the 2021 PGDip EC programme, a few learners expressed an interest in remaining involved with the programme. Recognising the potential to enhance learner support, the programme convener discussed the opportunity to expand the tutor group

with the researcher. This initiative was further supported by findings from the descriptive literature review conducted as part of this research (Chapter 4). Consequently, an action plan to expand the existing tutor group was developed using SMART objectives (Figure 13 and Table 14).¹⁷³

Table 14: SMART Objective for PAR Cycle One

SMART Framework	Action
Specific	Establish a tutor support programme where learners are assigned to tutors for mentoring during the PGDip EC 2022.
Measurable	Monitor interactions between tutors and learners on the tutor WhatsApp group to identify common areas of need and assess the effectiveness of the support provided.
Achievable	Launch the tutor support programme at the start of the 2022 academic year, ensuring each incoming candidate is paired with a tutor. Tutors will provide guidance and support throughout the programme, integrating mentorship into the learner journey.
Relevant	Provide an additional layer of support to PGDip EC learners.
Timely	Implement the tutor support programme to be operational by the next academic intake (PGDip EC 2022).

12.6 The Acting Stage

In December 2021, an announcement was made to all 35 PGDip EC learners (now graduates), inviting those interested to join the tutor group. The purpose of this invitation was to expand the tutor group to support the incoming PGDip EC 2022 cohort. Four new tutors were recruited as a result, expanding the tutor group from two divisional tutors to six for the new academic year. Four graduates volunteered and were recruited, increasing the tutor group from two divisional staff tutors to six for new academic year. Although the invitation was extended to the entire graduating class, all four volunteers had entered the PGDip EC through RPL for access.the

12.7 The Developing Stage

12.7.1 *The tutor orientation site*

A tutor orientation site was developed on UCT's LMS to guide the tutors.¹⁷⁴ This platform serves as an orientation resource for tutors involved in the PGDip EC programme, providing tutors with the necessary information and tools to support learners.

Features of the site include:

- Courses on the PGDip EC: Provides detailed information about the courses included in the PGDip EC programme, enabling tutors to understand the curriculum and align their support accordingly.¹⁷⁴
- Tutor Roles and Time Management: Outlines tutors' responsibilities and offers guidance on efficient time management to balance tutoring duties with other commitments.¹⁷⁴
- Communication: Offers strategies for effective communication with learners.¹⁷⁴
- Discussion-based Tutorials: Provides insights on facilitating engaging and productive discussion-based tutorials.¹⁷⁴
- Resources: Guides tutors on utilising educational resources to support learner engagement and comprehension.¹⁷⁴
- Marking and Feedback: Offers best practices for assessing learner performance and providing constructive feedback to promote academic growth.¹⁷⁴

Additionally, the site includes details of UCT's support services, a glossary of relevant terms, and a question-and-answer section to address common queries.¹⁷⁴ Tutors were thus encouraged to familiarise themselves with the content and reach out to the head tutor, programme convener, or course lecturers for further support.

12.7.2 *Allocation of learners to tutors*

During the Introduction to Postgraduate Studies course in 2022, the programme convener adopted a structured approach to divide all PGDip EC learners into groups of four to five. These groups intentionally comprised a mix of RPL and non-RPL

learners, ensuring inclusivity and preventing any group from being exclusively RPL learners. The programme convenor then assigned a tutor to each group for the academic year.

The tutors were introduced to the PGDip learners during an online introductory meeting, which is a component of the Introduction to Postgraduate Studies course. During this meeting, the tutor programme was explained to the learners, highlighting the voluntary nature of engagement. Additionally, both tutors and learners were encouraged to introduce themselves on Padlet, a digital board available within the LMS.

12.8 The Reflecting Stage

During this cycle, the tutor group was expanded from two to six with the aim of providing support to all learners in the PGDip EC. This strategy aligns with Vygotsky's SCT and MKOs.^{2,91} In this theory, the MKO serves as a guide, helping learners overcome institutional and technological barriers, which are preconditions for engaging with the academic content within their ZPD.³¹ As graduates of the programme, the new tutors had a strong understanding of the pressures and demands within the programme, enabling them to provide support that was both academically and contextually relevant. The tutor group functioned as MKOs, offering guidance to help learners navigate the challenges of postgraduate education.

This cycle expanded the tutor group and oriented new tutors to the PGDip EC programme, but the efficiency of the tutor support programme was undetermined. This prompted several questions, including whether the learners would engage with the tutors, for what specific purposes they would seek tutor support, whether the tutors required additional support themselves, and how effective the tutoring programme was in meeting its intended objectives. These questions highlighted the iterative nature of PAR and informed the design and focus of PAR cycle two, which sought to understand and reflect on the tutor group's experiences.

CHAPTER 13: Participatory Action Research Cycle Two – The Tutor Student Charter

13.1 Background

In cycle one, a tutor group consisting of divisional tutors and PGDip EC graduates was developed and envisioned to support learners during the 2022 PGDip EC (Chapter 12). This initiative aimed to assist learners and alleviate some of the pressure on the programme convener and lecturing staff. The implementation of this tutor group laid the groundwork for PAR cycle two, which built on the reflections and questions that emerged from the first cycle.

The aim of PAR cycle two was to explore and reflect on the tutor group's experiences in their new roles. Learning from these experiences could identify areas where additional support or training is required.

13.2 Methods

The researcher followed Mertler's four-phase action research approach, integrating the nine steps of an action cycle as a methodological scaffold for the study.⁵ The steps and phases are depicted in Figure 13.

The four stages of this PAR cycle (Figure 17) are:

1. The Planning Stage – June 2022
 - a. A discussion group was held with tutors to identify areas of support for them and the learners, and to hear about their experiences as tutors.
2. The Acting Stage – July to September 2022
 - a. Content analysis of group discussion
 - b. Identification of themes
 - c. Review plan – Identify the need for a charter
3. The Developing Stage – August to October 2022

- a. Development of a Tutor Student Charter for use with the 2023 PGDip EC cohort.
4. The Reflecting Stage – March to May 2023
- a. Establishment of communication between PGDip EC learners and tutors using a safety cross.
 - b. Distribution of an online questionnaire to tutors for feedback on the charter.

The method employed in conducting each stage is described within that stage, followed by the results and discussion.

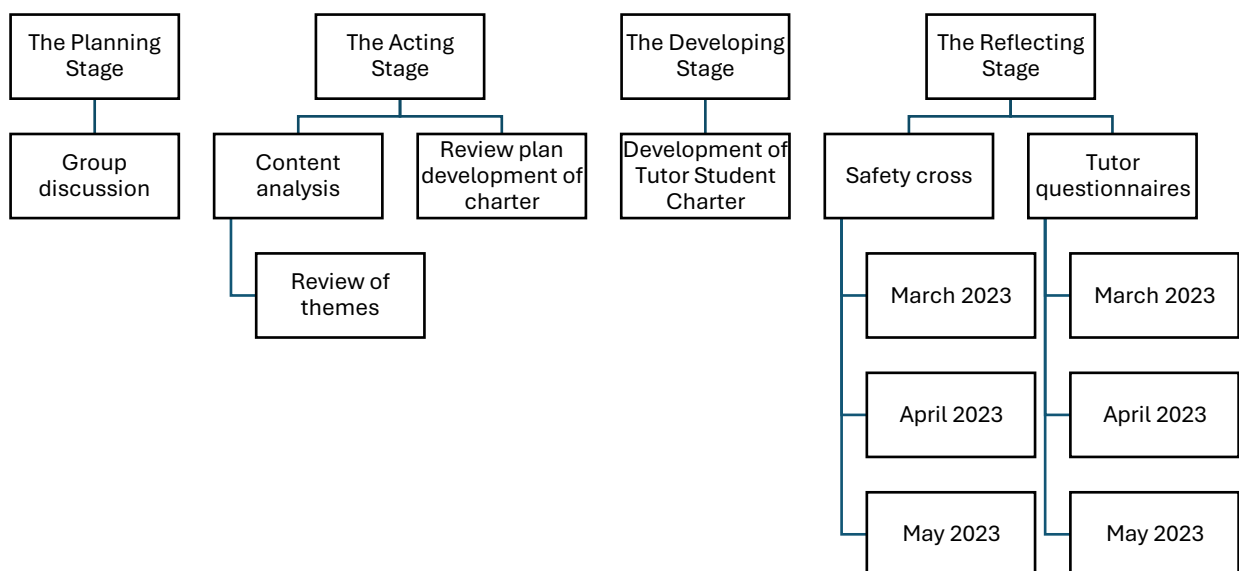


Figure 17: PAR Cycle Two Process

13.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approvals were obtained, as discussed under heading 6.4.

13.4 Ethical Concerns

13.4.1 *The group discussion*

The researcher invited tutors to participate in the group discussion via email. This occurred during the planning stage for PAR cycle two. The email provided an overview of the research, explaining the purpose of the discussion, and included details about consent, recording procedures, and participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Informed consent was obtained from three available tutors; the other three tutors could not participate due to work commitments. A discussion brief was used as a guide during the group discussion, which lasted 55 minutes (Appendix 10). The transcriptions were anonymised by removing identifiable information and assigning each tutor a code to ensure confidentiality after the discussion. All data were securely stored on a password-protected device and will be destroyed five years after the study's publication.

13.5 The Planning Stage

The planning stage of a PAR cycle involves identifying key areas for exploration.^{155,157} In this research, this stage was informed by feedback from the first cycle. This cycle involved a tutor group discussion, which led to the development of a Tutor Student Charter. The process was structured using an action plan and the SMART framework, as illustrated in Figure 18 and Table 15.¹⁶⁸

Table 15: SMART Objective for PAR Cycle two

SMART Framework	Action
Specific	Develop a comprehensive Tutor Student Charter for the PGDip EC programme to clearly define boundaries, response times, and communication protocols for tutor-learner interactions. This charter will address key issues such as last-minute requests and tutor-hopping to enhance the consistency and equity of support.
Measurable	Monitor the charter's implementation by tracking the frequency of communication between tutors and learners using a safety cross adapted for communication. Collect feedback from tutors through surveys conducted over a three-month period.
Achievable	Engage the programme convenor and tutors in collaboratively designing the charter during PAR cycle two. Distribute the charter to the PGDip EC 2023 learners, who should sign within the first two weeks after commencing the programme.
Relevant	The charter addresses tutors' workload by formalising communication expectations and reducing out-of-office engagement.
Timely	Finalise the Tutor Student Charter, with an implementation deadline of PGDip EC 2023.

13.5.1 Overview of tutor group for 2022

At the beginning of 2022, each tutor was allocated a random group of PGDip EC 2022 learners, forming individual tutor groups to foster academic and institutional support. Each tutor was free to decide what medium of communication to use, and some options included a chat room on the LMS, emails and WhatsApp groups. Each new tutor was also added to a 'tutor orientation page' on the LMS that provided guidance on learner communication, the use of university resources, and tutor responsibilities.¹⁷⁴

Tutors were added to a tutor WhatsApp group that included the programme convenor, course conveners and lecturing staff. The researcher was also added once approval for this research was obtained. Some lecturing staff and course conveners opted not to participate in the WhatsApp group, and no administrative staff elected to be on the group. The group mainly focused on deadline-driven communication, with the primary

means of communication for the programme and with the lecturing staff remaining email communication.

13.5.2 Focus group discussion with the tutors

The researcher invited tutors to participate in the focus group discussion via email. The email provided an overview of the research, explaining the purpose of the discussion, and included details about consent, recording procedures, and participants' right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Informed consent was obtained from three available tutors; the other three tutors could not participate due to work commitments. A discussion brief was used as a guide during the group discussion, which lasted 55 minutes (Appendix 10). The transcriptions were anonymised by removing identifiable information and assigning each tutor a code to ensure confidentiality after the discussion. All data were securely stored on a password-protected device and will be destroyed five years after the study's publication.

During the 2022 semester break, all tutors were invited to participate in a loosely structured focus group discussion; three of the tutors were able to attend. This break occurred midway through the PGDip EC programme (18 weeks into the programme), following the completion of three of the six courses: *Introduction to Postgraduate Studies*, *Concepts in Emergency Care* and *Adult Emergency Medicine*. The programme convenor, course convenors and lecturing staff were excluded from the group discussion.

With the first half of the programme completed and the potential for increased learner needs at the beginning of the programme, the discussion was arranged mid-year to explore any emerging challenges and identify support requirements. The discussion was held online, using Microsoft Teams, at a time convenient for the tutors, with the primary aim to ascertain areas where both tutors and learners might benefit from additional support in the programme. The discussion points were loosely structured to allow for open and meaningful conversation, fostering an environment where tutors could share their experiences, highlight challenges, and propose solutions (Appendix 10).

The discussion commenced with a welcome, followed by an explanation of informed consent and participants' right to withdraw. Once consent was obtained, the session was recorded. A brief overview of the study and action cycle was also provided.

13.6 Content Analysis

After the group discussion, the researcher verified the accuracy of the transcription against the recording to ensure reliability. All identifying data were removed to maintain confidentiality, and codes were applied to anonymise each tutor. The content analysis began with familiarisation, where the researcher listened to the recording and read the transcript multiple times to grasp the context of the data.¹⁷⁵ Key phrases and sections were then assigned initial codes, which were grouped into broader themes that captured recurring patterns and reflected shared experiences among participants. These themes were reviewed to ensure they accurately represented the data and remained distinct from one another. Finally, they were defined, named, and synthesised into a comprehensive report, supported by direct quotes from the discussion to illustrate key insights. This systematic and rigorous approach ensured the findings were trustworthy, grounded in the data, and reflective of the participants' perspectives.

The content analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes and categories to emerge directly from the data rather than being guided by predefined frameworks.¹⁷⁵⁻¹⁷⁷ To ensure dependability, an audit trail of research decisions was maintained, while triangulation within the broader PAR cycle enhanced credibility.^{136,178} Reflexive notetaking during the group discussion further contributed to transparency and depth in the data collection process.^{111,135,143}

13.7 Results of the Focus Group Discussion with the Tutors

Table 16 consolidates the themes and insights into a single, structured format. Two themes were identified during the content analysis, namely challenges with academic writing and the need for boundaries. It must also be noted that all PGDp EC learners

were included in the tutor support programme, and unless specified, the findings relate to both RPL and non-RPL learners.

Table 16: Codes and Themes from the Group Discussion

Key Phrases	Codes	Themes
“A lot of people actually failed the intro to PG studies this year.” (T1)	Academic readiness issues	Challenges with academic writing
“Understanding of how to write, if they don’t have that, the rest of the subjects they will struggle in.” (T3)	Foundational course importance	Challenges with academic writing
“I get asked, what is meant by academic writing?” (T2)	Gaps in academic writing and understanding	Challenges with academic writing
“The second thing is in terms of self-reflecting - how to actually combine this with academic writing.” (T2)	Integration of reflection and writing	Challenges with academic writing
“Reflection models and academic writing are difficult for students to grasp.” (T2)	Academic writing challenges	Challenges with academic writing
“They’ve got an expectation that you should help them now.” (T1)	Immediate response expectations	The need for boundaries
“They send it to you at the 99th minute and expect help – this was often a Sunday evening.” (T3)	Last-minute queries	The need for boundaries
“Pop between teachers looking for the best answer.” (T2)	Tutor-hopping	The need for boundaries
“Providing consistent answers between tutors is important.” (T2)	Unanimity in tutor guidance	The need for boundaries

13.7.1 Theme 1 – Challenges with academic writing

The tutors perceived the *Introduction to Postgraduate Studies* course as the most challenging for learners. This course laid the foundation for the programme, creating what was perceived by the tutors as an intense learning curve for learners unfamiliar with university systems. Tutors noted that prior exposure to concepts such as academic writing and self-reflection could better prepare learners for this course. One tutor suggested incorporating prerequisite or introductory material before the start of

the programme: *“So I feel that we should look if it's possible to add it when they apply or as a prerequisite to start”* [Tutor 3].

Tutors also highlighted gaps in learners' understanding of academic writing. A learner reportedly asked: *“What is meant by academic writing?”* [Tutor 2]. Participants further explained that the learners struggled to integrate self-reflection with academic writing: *“The second thing is in terms of self-reflecting - how to actually combine this with academic writing”* [Tutor 2].

13.7.2 Theme 2 – The need for boundaries

Tutors expressed concerns regarding the boundaries of time, tutor-hopping, and the expectations placed on them for the support they felt they should provide. These concerns highlighted the tension between learners' expectations and the tutors' capacity to provide assistance within their professional roles. One tutor remarked, *“They've got an expectation that you should help them now,”* [Tutor 1] illustrating that learners frequently sought immediate responses, often at inopportune times. This was particularly evident on Sundays before assignment deadlines, with another tutor noting, *“They send it to you at the 99th minute and expect help – this was often a Sunday evening”* [Tutor 3].

Another issue was learners' tendency to seek assistance from multiple tutors, often disregarding their group allocations. One tutor described this behaviour as *“...pop between teachers looking for the best answer”* [Tutor 2]. This behaviour complicated the tutors' ability to manage their workload effectively and provide equitable support to all learners.

13.8 Discussion

The findings from the group discussion presented two themes: challenges with academic writing and the necessity for boundaries in the tutor-learner relationship. The tutors highlighted that academic writing may be a barrier for many learners enrolled in the PGDip EC. This observation is supported by existing literature, which emphasises that academic writing at the postgraduate level is a specialised skill that requires continuous refinement and practice.⁵⁵ This challenge becomes even more pronounced

for RPL learners, whose prior educational experiences may not have included exposure to structured academic writing practices.¹⁰³

The second theme highlighted the necessity to establish boundaries to manage tutor-learner interactions effectively. Tutors reported frequent last-minute requests for assistance, often at inconvenient times, such as weekends preceding assignment deadlines. Such incidents reflect a misalignment of learner expectations with tutor availability and professional responsibilities. Additionally, the practice of 'tutor-hopping', where learners bypass their assigned tutors to seek alternative perspectives, further compounded these challenges. These findings align with broader research advocating for structured communication protocols and clearly defined boundaries to support equitable learner engagement and protect tutor well-being.^{29,179} Unregulated communication can lead to increased stress and burnout among educators, thereby compromising the quality of support they provide.^{12,29,179} Policies specifying appropriate response times and preferred communication methods can mitigate unrealistic expectations, ensuring a sustainable workload for tutors while fostering productive interactions.^{29,179}

13.9 The Acting Stage

The acting stage of PAR involves implementing planned actions to address identified issues and gathering data to evaluate their impact. It focuses on engaging participants in real-world interventions, ensuring the process is both collaborative and responsive.¹⁴⁹

13.9.1 Designing a Tutor Student Charter

Recognising the need to balance accessibility with sustainability, structured guidelines were essential to formalise expectations and establish clear communication boundaries. A Tutor Student Charter was developed based on the guidelines and policies of UCT, other South African universities, and international practices (Appendix 13).¹⁷⁹⁻¹⁸⁰ While the term 'Tutor Student Charter' may not be widely cited in academic literature, its principles align with existing institutional frameworks that address professional boundaries and communication protocols in higher education.

For instance, the University of the Western Cape's guidelines emphasise the importance of professionalism, advising tutors to create safe and supportive learning environments while maintaining boundaries.¹⁸¹ Similarly, the University of Johannesburg's policy highlights tutors' role in supporting learners' psycho-social well-being, referring them to appropriate university resources, and serving as professional role models through responsible and ethical engagement.¹⁸⁰ Internationally, institutions advocate for clear professional boundaries and encourage learner independence to prevent over-dependence.^{28,179} By incorporating these principles, the Tutor Student Charter could serve as a dynamic document that establishes clear communication expectations while empowering tutors to define their own boundaries. The conceptualisation of the charter took place in December 2022, and it was rolled out to the tutors at the programme's start in February 2023 (Figure 18).

To evaluate the efficacy of the Tutor Student Charter, a safety cross was adapted to track communication outside of the tutors' availability hours (Figures 19-21) over a three-month period following the charter's dissemination to learners (March to May 2023). The *safety cross* is a visual management tool originating from Toyota's production system.¹⁸² It is commonly used to track incidents or activities over time using a colour-coded grid to identify trends and areas requiring intervention. Initially applied in workplace safety and healthcare, it has since been adapted across sectors for monitoring purposes.¹⁸² In this study, the safety cross was used to monitor and record communication on the tutor WhatsApp group, providing a structured approach to categorising the nature of interactions.

**Participatory Action Plan Cycle 2
Development of a Tutor Student Charter**

1. Problem or gap identified	2. Cause analysis
1. Tutors are experiencing boundary issues with students, such as frequent contact outside designated hours and a lack of adherence to assigned tutor groups. 2. Tutors are handling queries beyond academic support, such as administrative and emotional concerns, leading to increased workload. Student hopping is occurring between tutors.	1. No formal framework existed outlining expectations and boundaries between tutors and learners. 2. Learners were unsure of appropriate times and methods for contacting tutors. 3. Students approached multiple tutors.

3. Action Plan	4. Implementation process
<p>Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound</p> <p>Specific: Develop a Tutor Student Charter to outline communication boundaries between students and tutors.</p> <p>Measurable: Track tutors' compliance with distributing the charter, monitor students' adherence, and gather tutors' feedback through monthly surveys.</p> <p>Achievable: Involve the programme convener and tutors in the charter's creation and ensure all students sign the document within the first two weeks.</p> <p>Relevant: The charter addresses tutors' workload by formalising communication expectations and reducing out-of-hours engagement.</p> <p>Time-bound: Complete the charter's development in the first month, distribute it by week three, and conduct three-monthly feedback reviews.</p>	<p>What? Draft the Tutor Student Charter and send it out to each learner on the PGDIP EC programme with instructions on completion.</p> <p>Who? Programme convener, tutor group and researcher.</p> <p>How? Send the charter via email to all students.</p>

5. Evaluation plan
1. Conduct three-monthly online surveys to collect feedback from tutors regarding the effectiveness of the charter in setting boundaries. 2. Track instances of boundary violations (e.g., contacting outside of hours) and use these findings to refine the charter if necessary. 3. Compare the levels of reliance on tutors before and after the implementation of the charter to measure its impact.

Progress: date	Comment
05012022	Tutor Student Charter developed
07012022	Sent to programme convenor, and comments received
12012022	Sent to tutor group for feedback
15012022	Tutor Student Charter finalised
28022022	Tutor Student Charter sent to students for completion
25032023	First questionnaire sent to tutors
25042023	Second questionnaire sent to tutors
25052023	Third questionnaire sent to tutors
June 2023	Reflection

Figure 18: Action Plan for Cycle Two

13.10 The Developing Phase

The developing phase bridges the gap between analysis and action, serving as the transition from analytical insights to practical applications.⁵ During the group discussions, the theme of setting boundaries emerged. Building on this theme, the plan for a Tutor Student Charter was conceptualised. This stage involved translating insights into actionable steps through the development of the charter.

To ensure relevance and adoption, the *Tutor Student Charter* was developed through a collaborative process involving the tutors, programme convenor, head of the tutor programme, and the researcher. This participatory approach ensured the solutions were grounded in real-world experiences, fostering a shared sense of ownership and accountability.^{5,152,154,162}

The researcher prepared the initial draft of the charter, which was then sent to the programme convenor for input. From there, the draft underwent an iterative feedback process and was circulated between the programme convenor and the tutors for further refinement. Once all revisions were incorporated, the final version was reviewed and approved by the tutors and the programme convenor (Appendix 13).

After finalising the Tutor Student Charter, each tutor could customise it by specifying their preferred availability and communication channels. This flexibility enabled tutors to set sustainable boundaries aligned with their professional responsibilities and personal commitments. At the commencement of the PGDip EC 2023, tutors distributed the customised charters to their allocated learners through their chosen communication platforms. Each learner was required to review and sign the charter, signifying their acceptance. This step fostered mutual agreement and accountability, establishing a shared understanding of expectations between tutors and learners.

It was envisioned that the Tutor Student Charter would serve as a point of reference should a learner communicate outside the boundaries set by the tutors. It could be sent as a reminder to reinforce expectations.

13.10.1 Implementation of the Tutor Student Charter

At the beginning of the PGDip EC 2023, once the programme convenor randomly allocated all the PGDip EC learners to a tutor, the tutors received the Tutor Student Charter via email from the programme convenor. They were requested to complete it and discuss their boundaries with all the learners within their groups. After the discussion, this was signed by the learners and sent back to the tutors. The tutors kept a copy and shared a copy with the programme convenor. Table 17 displays the chosen communication times, channels and expected turnaround time set by the 2023 tutors.

Table 17: Summary of the Tutor Student Charter

Tutor	Times of communication	Channels of communication	Expected turnaround time (as per each tutor's charter)
Tutor 1	Mon-Fri 8 am – 5 pm Sat 8 am – 1 pm	Email or WhatsApp	Depends on if I'm busy with a patient – but will be as soon as I can
Tutor 2	Mon-Thursday 8 am – 5 pm Friday 5 pm – 8 pm Saturday 3 pm – 5 pm	Email or WhatsApp	24 hours or next working day
Tutor 3	Mon-Fri 8 am – 5 pm Sat 8 am -1 pm	Email or WhatsApp	24 hours (weekdays) or next business day (weekends)
Tutor 4	Mon-Fri 8 am – 5 pm Sat 8 am – 1 pm	Email or WhatsApp	24 hours
Tutor 5	Mon-Fri 8 am – 5 pm Sat 8 am – 1 pm	Email or WhatsApp	24 hours
Tutor 6	Mon-Fri 8 am – 5 pm Sat 8 am – 1 pm	Email or WhatsApp	24 hours or next working day

13.11 The Reflecting Stage

A three-month safety cross (March to May) and online questionnaires sent to the tutors (March to May) formed the feedback for this reflection stage (Figures 19 to 21).

13.11.1 Tutor WhatsApp group and the safety cross

The researcher monitored activity in the tutor WhatsApp group from March to May 2023, following the rollout of the Tutor Student Charter. During this period, all tutor communication in this group was recorded and categorised using the safety cross. The communication was divided into three categories, each represented by a different colour on the safety cross (Figures 19-21).

1. **Communication – non-specific (green colour code):** This category included any queries relevant to the university but not directly related to the programme, such as financial assistance inquiries or general institutional questions. All information pertaining to these queries is available on the course and programme outline available to each learner on the LMS.
2. **Communication – learner-specific inside office hours (orange colour code):** This category captured communication occurring between 8 am and 5 pm on weekdays and included programme-related inquiries, such as assistance with the LMS, content clarification, or assessment-related queries. All information pertaining to these queries is available on the course and programme outline available to each learner on the LMS.
3. **Communication – learner-specific outside office hours (red colour code):** This category encompassed communication that occurred outside regular working hours and covered programme-related inquiries, including LMS support, content clarification, or assessment-related assistance. All information pertaining to these queries is available on the course and programme outline available to each learner on the LMS.

It is acknowledged that this form of monitoring, as recorded on the safety cross, only captured communication tutors posted in the WhatsApp group. This may have excluded some of their direct communication with learners or interactions conducted through the correct channels.

Safety cross - Communication

Month and year Mar-23

Tutor student charter sent 22-Feb-23

- GREEN Communication - non student specific
- ORANGE Communication - student related **inside** office hours
- RED Communication - student related **outside** office hours
- Weekend/Public Holiday

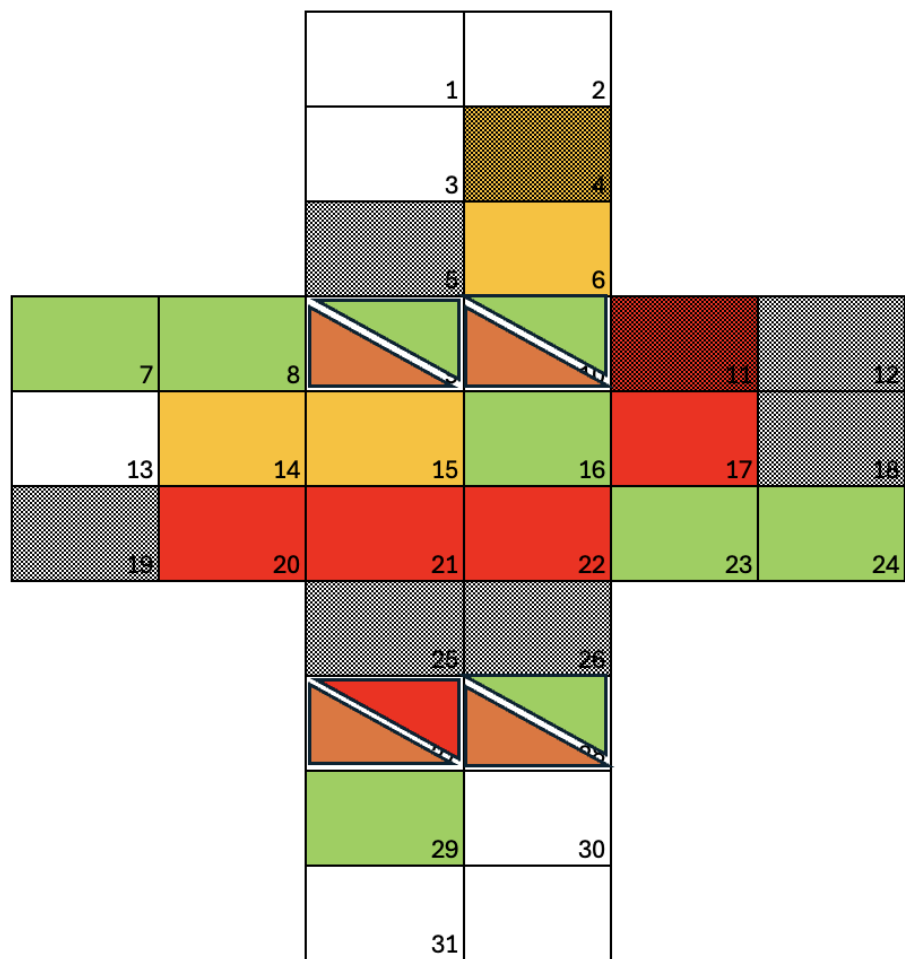


Figure 19: Safety Cross March 2023

Safety cross - Communication

Month and year Apr-23
 Tutor student charter sent 22-Feb-23

- GREEN Communication - non student specific
- ORANGE Communication - student related **inside** office hours
- RED Communication - student related **outside** office hours
- Weekend/Public Holiday

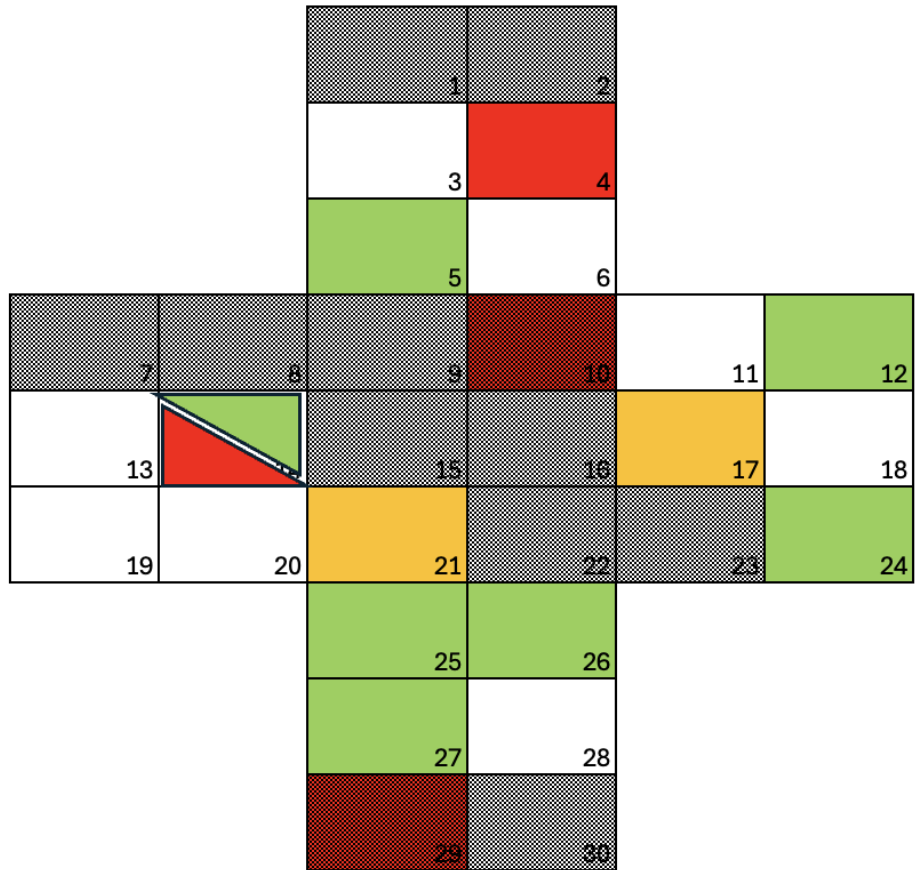


Figure 20: Safety Cross April 2023

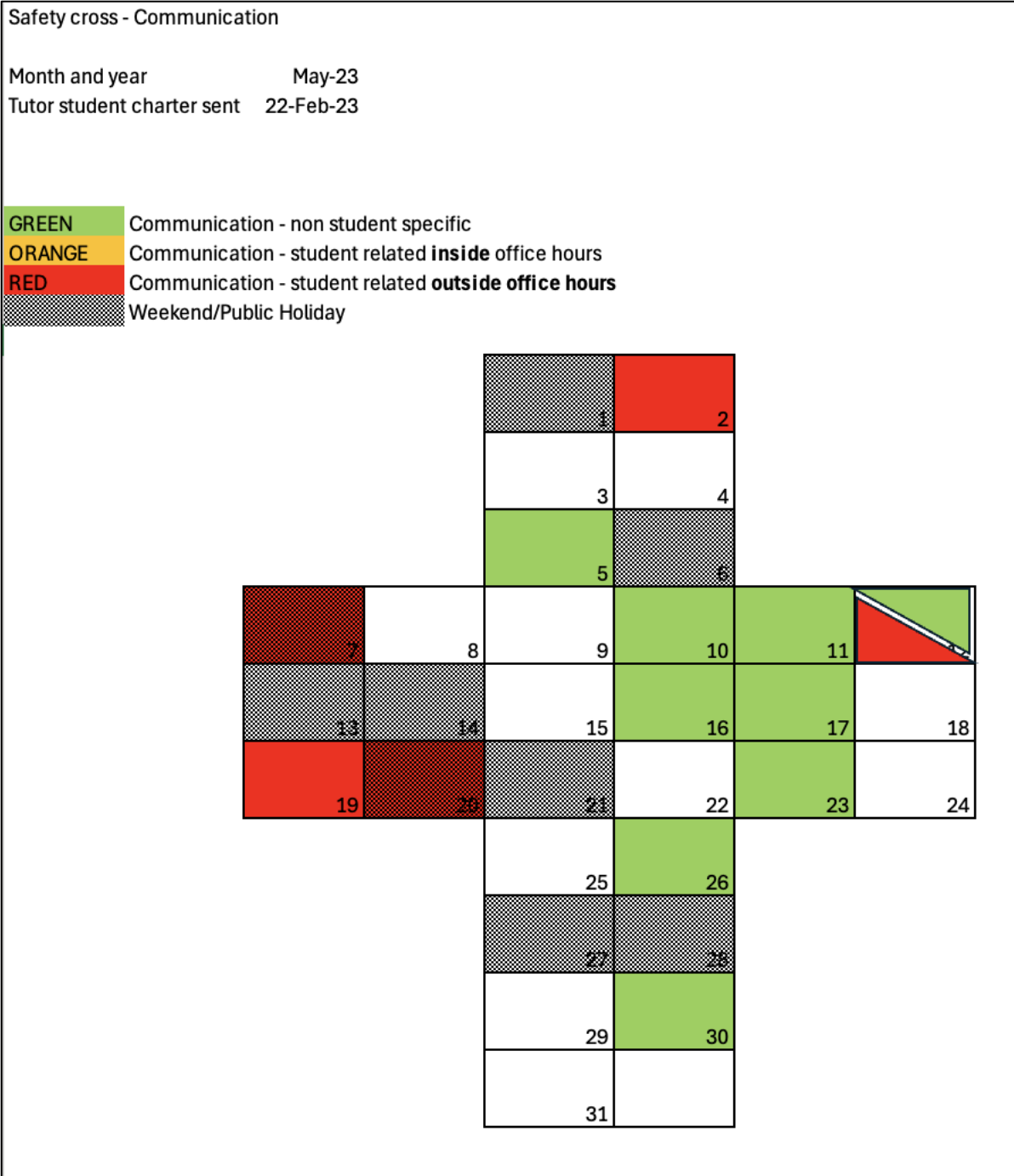


Figure 21: Safety Cross May 2023

The researcher observed two developments in the centralised WhatsApp group: first, communication often occurred outside working hours, contrary to the guidelines reflected in the Tutor Student Charter (Table 17); second, tutors used the group to ask questions on behalf of learners. However, learners were expected to raise such queries themselves through the correct communication channels. These channels, clearly outlined in the programme and course documents, specify the appropriate

methods and designated contacts for various issues. For example, problems related to the LMS should be addressed directly by learners to an administrator or the university IT support team rather than being raised by tutors in the tutor-learner WhatsApp group.

13.11.1.1 Results: Safety cross

While there may have been instances where the exact time of learner-initiated contact was not accurately reflected due to delayed message delivery or offline notifications, or when the learner used the appropriate communication channel, clear communication patterns were identified. Table 18 presents a comparison of the days and times when communication occurred and assessment submission deadlines.

Table 18: Correlation of Communication Spikes and Assessment Dates

Date	Assessments	Communication outside of tutor availability
Introduction to Postgraduate Studies Course		
27 February – 5 March 2023	Searching for Evidence Exercise (Assessment Date: 2 March Peer Review 5 March 2023)	Queries during office hours
6–12 March 2023	Read and Summarise Article (Assessment Date: 9–12 March 2023)	11 March 2023
13–19 March 2023	Write an Abstract (Assessment Date: 16–19 March 2023)	17 and 20 March 2023
20–26 March 2023	Word Document Format (Assessment Date: 23–26 March 2023)	21 and 22 March 2023
27 March – 2 April 2023	Endnote References (Assessment Date: 2 April 2023)	27 March 2023
3–9 April 2023	Final Assignment submission (Assessment Date: 9 April 2023)	4 and 10 April 2023
Concepts of Emergency Care Course		
10–16 April 2023	Triage Tools submission (Assessment Date: 15 April 2023)	10 and 14 April 2023

Date	Assessments	Communication outside of tutor availability
17–23 April 2023	Am I Prepared? Assignment (Assessment Date: 20 April 2023)	Queries during office hours
24 April – 1 May 2023	How Do You Do Handovers? Submission (Assessment Date: 1 May 2023)	29 April and 2 May 2023
Adult Emergency Care Course		
20–26 March 2023	Respiration Discussion Response (Assessment Date: 27–28 March 2023)	27 March 2023
1–9 April 2023	Chest Injuries, Chest X-ray, Blood Gas Self-assessments (Ongoing during 1–9 April 2023)	10 April 2023
15–18 April 2023	Circulatory Failure Discussion Posting and Responses (Assessment Date: 14 April 2023)	14 April 2023
23–30 April 2023	Circulatory Failure Self-assessment and Portfolio Task 2 (Assessment Date: 29 April 2023)	29 April 2023
6–14 May 2023	Neurology Discussion Posting, Portfolio Task 3 (Assessment Date: 2, 7 and 12 May 2023)	7 and 12 May 2023
20–23 May 2023	Endocrine, Metabolic, Fluid, and Electrolytes Discussion (Assessment Date: 19–20 May 2023)	19 and 20 May 2023
28 May 2023	Endocrine, Metabolic, Fluid, and Electrolytes Self-assessment (Assessment Date: 28 May 2023)	

Based on the data from the safety crosses for March, April, and May 2023, the following was observed:

1. Communication Outside Office Hours:

Data from the WhatsApp group, as reflected in the red-coded entries on the safety cross, showed consistent communication outside tutor availability across all three months (Figures 19-21). Learners frequently reached out during evenings, weekends, and public holidays.

2. Increased Communication Before Key Dates:

Peaks in communication on the WhatsApp group often aligned with weekends and days leading up to deadlines or submission periods. This pattern was evident in March and April, where spikes in both learner-specific communication (orange and red-coded on the safety cross) were observed on certain weekends (Table 18).

3. Varied Nature of Communication:

Green-coded entries on the safety cross, representing non-learner-specific communication, included queries related to administrative matters or general requests, such as contact details. While these interactions were less frequent than academic-related queries, they indicate that tutors also served as a point of contact for broader guidance.

13.11.2 Tutor questionnaires

Three online questionnaires were distributed to tutors monthly (March, April and May 2023) (Appendix 7-9). The questionnaires assessed whether the Tutor Student Charter was useful in establishing and maintaining communication boundaries, identified any challenges tutors faced in enforcing the guidelines, and gathered insights on learners' adherence to the agreed-upon communication times. This feedback provided observations of the usefulness of the charter and informed potential adjustments to better support both tutors and learners.

The results from the Microsoft Forms questionnaire were downloaded and exported into an Excel spreadsheet for analysis.^{178,179} This was kept on a password-protected

computer, and the tutors' responses were analysed using comparative and content analysis.

13.11.2.1 Methods

Three online questionnaires were distributed to all six tutors in March, April and May 2023, with the first sent one month after the charter's introduction (Table 19, Appendices 7-9). The six tutors responded to each of the three questionnaires.

The questionnaires were designed for online completion using Microsoft Forms.¹⁸³ The links were sent to a divisional assistant lecturer for testing to ensure the link functioned correctly and the responses were accurately captured. One change was made to the May questionnaire to improve flow. The questionnaires were structured as follows:

Table 19: Summary of PAR Cycle Two Questionnaires

Questionnaire	Design	Sent
March Questionnaire	8 questions Open and closed-ended questions.	27 March 2023 via email
April Questionnaire	13 questions Open and closed-ended questions.	23 April 2023 via email
May Questionnaire	12 questions Open and closed-ended questions.	25 May 2023 via email

Once ethical approval was obtained for the research (see heading 13.3), the researcher informed tutors about the research objectives via email at the end of March, April, and May 2023 to ensure they understood the study's purpose. All tutors voluntarily agreed to engage as the research evolved. The tutors were assured that their details would remain anonymised throughout the research process, safeguarding their privacy. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any stage without any consequences. No remuneration was provided to tutors for their participation in this research.^{111,172}

13.11.2.2 Data analysis

All tutors participated in each of the three questionnaires. The tutors' responses were analysed using content analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the data.

13.11.2.3 Results – Tutor questionnaire

The results of the questionnaires are summarised as follows:

Tutor Feedback One (March 2023) Summary:

- All tutors reported that no learners raised objections or concerns about the Tutor Student Charter, and none had to remind learners of the charter's content.
- One tutor noted that a few learners did not acknowledge the charter. The tutor shared that the charter was resent, but no further feedback was received explaining why it was not signed. The rest of the tutors reported no problems with learner compliance.

Tutor Feedback Two (April 2023) Summary:

- No tutors reported recent concerns or objections from learners regarding the charter.
- One tutor indicated they had engaged with learners outside their stipulated working hours.
- WhatsApp was identified as the method most used by learners to communicate with their tutors.

Tutor Feedback Three (May 2023) Summary:

- All tutors found the Tutor Student Charter effective in setting boundaries for communication and interaction, although some learners still communicated outside the designated times.
- The tutors indicated they did not need to remind the learners of the charter.
- No major recommendations were offered for improving the charter, although it was suggested that it continue to be used in the next academic year.

13.12 Discussion – WhatsApp Group, Safety Cross and Questionnaires

The findings from the safety cross analysis revealed a pattern of learners contacting tutors outside of designated working hours. These instances were particularly prominent during evenings, weekends, and public holidays, often coinciding with assessment deadlines or submission periods. While this behaviour suggests that learners may require additional support outside standard academic hours, it may also reflect the reality that many learners, particularly those balancing work and study, only have time to engage with their studies during non-office hours.^{13,17,105} This explanation aligns with the broader realities of postgraduate education, where learners must manage academic and professional responsibilities simultaneously.^{103,106}

The feedback gathered from the tutor questionnaires did not fully align with the trends observed in the safety cross. While the red-coded entries on the safety cross highlighted ongoing communication outside designated availability, tutors did not consistently report these patterns in their questionnaires. For instance, all tutors in the March questionnaire reported no concerns or objections from learners regarding the Tutor Student Charter, yet communication during these times was documented on the WhatsApp group, as shown in the safety cross (Figure 19). This discrepancy may stem from underreporting by tutors or their focus on managing the interactions rather than identifying them as problematic. Alternatively, it may reflect that boundaries between tutors and learners were not consistently communicated or enforced, which supports the importance of the Tutor Student Charter in setting clear expectations.

Furthermore, this trend of out-of-hours contact correlates with the working schedules of most postgraduate learners, many of whom are employed full-time during conventional office hours and therefore require support during evenings and weekends.^{1,106} While this demonstrates a genuine need for flexibility in support structures, it also implies a cost implication that the university would need to address should extended hours of academic or mentorship support be formally integrated into institutional provision.⁵¹ At the same time, the reliance on voluntary tutor availability raises concerns around sustainability and the potential for fatigue or burnout.¹⁷⁹⁻¹⁸¹ This highlights the importance of setting realistic boundaries and ensuring that any

future expansion of support provision considers both learner needs and staff wellbeing.

In the context of this research, the tutors provided an additional layer of support to the PGDip EC learners. As all six tutors volunteered as tutors, the Tutor Student Charter protected their time and availability. The charter safeguarded the tutors from potential exploitation and contributed to their retention by establishing clear boundaries and expectations. While the PGDip EC learners also had access to broader institutional support services, they likely valued the social aspect of human connections with peers and colleagues through their interactions with the tutors.

The communication patterns can be linked to Vygotsky's ZPD. Within the ZPD, learners rely on the support of MKOs. Learners sought assistance from more knowledgeable others, in this case their tutors, to complete tasks beyond their independent ability.² The spike in communication during assessment periods illustrates how scaffolding was actively sought to bridge gaps in understanding or performance.² As Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory positions learning as a fundamentally social process, the WhatsApp group provided a platform where learners could co-construct knowledge, reinforcing the importance of collaborative participation for internalising new skills.^{90,94}

The findings also highlight the role of rules within Vygotsky's framework. Rules, such as those outlined in the Tutor Student Charter, function as mediating tools that structure tutor–learner interactions and protect sustainable engagement.² By setting expectations around communication times and methods, these rules were intended to create balance and consistency. However, the persistence of out-of-hours communication suggests that the enforcement and reinforcement of these rules require greater emphasis and institutional support.

After reflection, the researcher recognised that referring to these individuals as “tutors” may have been inaccurate. In higher education, a tutor is typically understood as someone who provides targeted, subject-specific instruction and supports learners in mastering academic content. In contrast, mentorship is defined as a broader, longer-term developmental relationship that encompasses academic, professional, and

psychosocial guidance, helping learners to navigate challenges beyond specific curriculum issues.^{184,185} Within South African higher education, mentoring is frequently adopted to strengthen transition, retention, and success, extending beyond the more limited instructional role of tutoring.⁷² In this study, the volunteers' engagement went beyond academic instruction to include emotional support, motivation, and scaffolding across academic and institutional domains. Their role therefore aligns more closely with the conceptualisation of a "mentor" than that of a "tutor," providing a more accurate framing of their contribution within the PAR process.

13.13 Report to Division of Emergency Care - Feedback from Tutor Interview – Report of Findings

This report summarises the findings (shared with the programme convenor) as part of the ongoing PAR process within the PGDip EC. It reflects feedback gathered from the focused group discussion held with the tutor group in June 2022 and was prepared in line with the commitments set out in the research proposal and agreed upon with the Emergency Medicine Divisional Research Committee (EMDRC).

Division of Emergency Medicine
University of Cape Town
Cape Town, South Africa

27 July 2022

To:

Associate Professor Clint Hendrikse
Head of Division: Emergency Medicine
University of Cape Town

Subject: Report on Findings from Tutor Group Feedback (2022)

Dear A/ Professor Hendrikse

This report summarises the findings shared with you as part of the ongoing PAR process within the PGDip EC. It reflects feedback gathered from the tutor group in

2022 and was prepared in accordance with the commitments set out in the research proposal and agreed upon with the Emergency Medicine Divisional Research Committee (EMDRC).

13.13.1 Finding 1 - Introduction to postgraduate studies

The tutors perceived that the 'Introduction to Postgraduate Studies' course was perhaps the most difficult for all learners. The tutors felt that this course laid the foundations for the programme and was an intense learning curve for those who had never experienced the functioning of a university. Tutor 3 commented: *"So I feel that we should look if it's possible to add it when they apply or as a prerequisite to start"*. Another tutor mentioned a learner had asked: *"What is meant by academic writing?"* [Tutor 2]. The tutors thus felt that if these learners had a prior understanding of postgraduate expectations, they may be able to approach the first course from a different perspective. This was further expanded with *"...the second thing is in terms of self-reflecting - how to actually combine this with academic writing"* [Tutor 2].

Suggested action

All learners (to mitigate bias between RPL and non-RPL) on the PGDip EC should receive a document detailing academic writing per the Department and UCT's policy. This can be provided to them prior to the start of the programme. Information on how to reference and one or two of the different referencing programs available should be included so that the learner can explore these in their own time.

13.13.2 Finding 2 – Setting of boundaries

Time

The tutors expressed concerns regarding the boundaries of time. They stated that learners blatantly disregarded these boundaries and expected them to step in and assist at a moment's notice. This was especially evident on the Sundays before an assignment submission. Tutor 4 explained, *"...they've got an expectation that you should help them now"* and *"they send it to you at the 99th minute and expect help – this was often a Sunday evening"*.

Group allocation:

According to Tutor 2, learners “*pop between teachers looking for the best answer*”. The point was thus raised by some participants in the interview that experienced learners migrated between the tutors of the various groups, potentially looking for answers or more information. Although the tutors understood this behaviour, limitations must be set to prevent unintentional undermining – for example, learners migrating to one tutor who tends to explain something differently or is more relaxed in time boundaries. This undermines those with rigid boundaries in place.

Suggested action:

It was recommended that boundaries should be set to support the tutors. It could be set collectively or individually. The boundaries can include:

1. Specific times and modes of contact: Each tutor should set boundaries that learners should follow, and tutors should portray these boundaries to the learners within their groups. This ensures consistency between all learners, and no learner has more time privileges than others.
2. Regular meetings between the tutors and the head of the tutors should be held. This would mitigate learners bouncing between tutors and ensure that all tutors convey the same set of information to the learners – this is particularly important in conveying post-assessment information.

13.13.3 Finding 3: Tutor assistance

“...that was the biggest question that I received, actually, how to answer the question, the approach and to think of it from a systematic point of view and not just from, you know, the EMS but from the global picture, they struggled, you know, to how to answer that” [Tutor 4].

This was a point that tutors kept returning to and appropriately summarised learner expectation versus tutor ability. Tutors were questioning how much information they could share with learners, and there may be a need to ascertain whether learners are using the tutors as leverage to access more information than what the educators are providing.

The tutors expressed an understanding of learners' insecurity in the approach to some of the assessments or assignments and recognised the learners' desire to do well and achieve good marks. Despite this understanding, it was acknowledged that the RPL learner-now-tutor reflected on their own experience and wanted to do their best to assist the learner through the programme. This results in a fine line of boundaries where 'how much I can do to help you' versus 'what is expected of me as a tutor'.

Suggested action:

To assist the tutors (many who have never assisted in the formal education environment), regular meetings and feedback sessions are required. It was evident in the interview that these online feedback sessions did not occur regularly. Although numerous emails are exchanged, these do not provide details of feedback, support, time or boundaries. Online meetings with experienced staff and educators are vital for the tutors as this will provide a framework of unity in a department and consistency between ranks. These regular meetings between the head of the tutors, educators, and the tutors themselves would guide the tutors in their understanding and the limitations of their role.

An additional recommendation is to capacitate the tutors with some of the UCT's support service contact details. Although these tutors may not have used the support services while they were learners, they can recommend/refer the learners in their groups.

13.14 Conclusion

Some tutors have never experienced higher education as a tutor. Despite this limitation, it is evident they thoroughly enjoyed the experience and succeeded as they learned. However, they required boundaries and additional support.

CHAPTER 14: Participatory Action Research Cycle Three

14.1 Background

A Tutor Student Charter was developed in cycle two to establish boundaries between tutors and learners (Chapter 13). PAR cycle three expands on this development by exploring how learners engaged with broader university support services and progressed in education post-graduation. Insights from all the cycles were aimed at developing a support framework that speaks to the fourth objective of the overall research study.

This cycle investigated two key areas: the 2023 PGDip EC cohort's engagement with university support services during their studies, particularly focusing on RPL candidates, and whether graduates from the 2022 PGDip EC cohort had enrolled in further qualifications post-graduation.

14.2 Methods

Cycle three was the final PAR cycle in this research. In this cycle, the researcher developed two online questionnaires, as summarised in Table 20. The PGDip EC programme convenor approved each questionnaire.

The questionnaires were designed for online completion using Microsoft Forms.¹⁸³ The links were tested by an external assistant to ensure they functioned correctly, and the responses were accurately captured. Two changes were made to the 2022 PGDip EC graduate questionnaire to improve grammar and flow; none were required for the 2023 PGDip EC learner questionnaire. The questionnaires were structured as follows:

Table 20: Summary of PAR 3 Questionnaires

Questionnaire	Design	Questionnaire sent	Inclusion
2022 PGDip EC graduate questionnaire	Open and closed-ended questions. 8 questions	27 November 2023 via email	All graduates from the PGDip EC 2022
2023 PGDip EC learner questionnaire	Open and closed-ended questions. 22 questions	14 August 2023 via email	All candidates on the PGDip EC 2023

The results from both questionnaires were downloaded and exported into Excel spreadsheets for analysis on a password-protected computer.¹⁸⁶ The responses from both questionnaires were analysed using descriptive and content analysis.

14.2.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical approvals were obtained, as illustrated in heading 6.4.

14.2.1.1 The 2022 PGDip EC graduate questionnaire

The researcher emailed the Microsoft link to all graduates from the 2022 PGDip EC in November 2023 (Appendix 12). The questionnaire email included the research details, information on informed consent, and information that withdrawal would not be possible after submitting the questionnaire, as the responses were anonymised. The first question of the questionnaire requested individuals' consent.

14.2.1.2 The 2023 PGDip EC cohort questionnaire

The researcher emailed the Microsoft link to all PGDip EC 2023 candidates in August 2023 (Appendix 11); this date was chosen as it preceded the final course assessment. The email included a reminder about the research, details on consent, and information on withdrawing from the study. Participants were informed that withdrawal would not be possible after submitting the questionnaire, as responses were anonymised. The first question of the questionnaire requested consent.

14.3 The Planning Stage

To ascertain how the 2023 PGDip EC cohort engaged with university support services during their studies, and whether graduates from the 2022 PGDip EC cohort had enrolled in further qualifications post-graduation, two online questionnaires were developed:

1. The 2022 PGDip EC graduate questionnaire focused on academic progression into further qualifications (Appendix 12).
2. The 2023 PGDip EC learner questionnaire examined learners' utilisation of university support services during their studies (Appendix 11).

The process was structured using an action plan and the SMART objectives, as illustrated in Figure 22 and Table 21.¹⁷³

Table 21: SMART Objective for PAR Cycle Three

SMART Framework	Action
Specific	Develop a 2022 PGDip EC graduate questionnaire focusing on graduates' academic progression into further qualifications. Develop a 2023 PGDip EC learner questionnaire examining learners' utilisation of university support services during their studies.
Measurable	Assess how many learners (from both RPL and non-RPL backgrounds) report using university support services. Assess how many of the 2022 graduates have enrolled in further NQF qualifications post-graduation.
Achievable	Use online questionnaires for ease of distribution and reporting.
Relevant	The information gained will support the development of the support framework.
Timely	Two online questionnaires that will take no more than five minutes to complete will be sent to two different cohorts.

14.4 The Acting Stage

The acting stage of PAR involves implementing planned actions to address identified issues and gathering data to evaluate their impact. It focuses on engaging participants in real-world interventions, ensuring the process is both collaborative and responsive.¹⁴⁶ This cycle drew on the action plan in Figure 18.

Participatory Action Plan Cycle 3
Enhancing Student Support Framework

1. Problem or gap identified	2. Cause analysis
<p>1. Learners, especially RPL candidates, demonstrate an over-reliance on the programme convener for support, underutilising university resources.</p> <p>2. Despite the availability of resources, many students don't make use of these services, remain unaware of these services, or prefer direct guidance from the convener, leading to a lack of engagement with the broader university support system.</p>	<p>1. Lack of awareness and visibility of available university support services.</p> <p>2. Learners are unfamiliar with navigating academic systems, leading to a dependency on direct assistance, and a lack of boundaries between tutors and learners.</p>

3. Action Plan	4. Implementation process
<p>Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound</p> <p>Specific: Develop a 2023 PGDip EC learner questionnaire to examine students' utilisation of university support services during their studies. Develop online questionnaires for the 2023 cohort to determine the use of university support services and continuum of education.</p> <p>Measurable: Assess how many students (from both RPL and non-RPL backgrounds) report using university support services. Assess how many of the 2023 graduates have enrolled in further NQF qualifications post-graduation.</p> <p>Achievable: Use online questionnaires for ease of sending and reporting.</p> <p>Relevant: The information gained will support the development of the support framework.</p> <p>Time-bound: Two online questionnaires that will take no more than 5 minutes to complete will be sent to two different cohorts.</p>	<p>What? Send out online questionnaires to gather data pertaining to support services and continuum of education</p> <p>Who? PhD candidate PGDip EC 2023 learners PGDip EC 2022 graduates Programme Convenor</p> <p>How? Online questionnaire</p>

5. Evaluation plan

1. Data will be analysed to determine if university support services were used.
2. Data will be analysed to determine if any of the graduates are studying further or plan to study further.

Progress: date	Comment
03042024	All data analysis completed
140782023	Support survey sent out
27112023	Graduate survey sent out
05122023	Data analysis
2024	Development of a support framework

Figure 22: Action Plan for Cycle Three

Two weeks after the questionnaires were emailed to all learners, their responses were reviewed, and the content analyses began.¹⁷⁶ First, the raw responses from the open-ended questions were reviewed, and patterns or themes were identified. Table 22 indicates the number of responses that were obtained from each questionnaire.

Table 22: Questionnaire Responses

Questionnaire	Possible participants	Responses
2022 PGDip EC graduate questionnaire	35	29 (83%)
2023 PGDip EC questionnaire	27	14 (52%)

14.4.1 The 2022 PGDip EC graduate survey

Table 23: Responses from PGDip EC 2022 Graduates

	Responses	Participants who enrolled in new NQF qualifications	Number of RPL graduates who enrolled in new NQF qualifications	Graduates who registered for a higher NQF qualification (for example, MPhil)	Graduates who registered for a lower NQF qualification (for example, a certificate programme)
2022 PGDip EC graduate questionnaire	29/35 (83%)	12	5	7	5

The findings from the 2022 cohort questionnaires showed that 34% of the graduates were motivated to pursue further academic qualifications after completing the PGDip EC (Table 23). Among the 12 graduates who registered for additional studies, seven pursued qualifications at an NQF level higher than postgraduate, while five opted for lower-level NQF qualifications. Of the five RPL graduates who responded, three registered for NQF Level 9 qualifications, one for an NQF Level 8 qualification, and one for a certificate programme (Table 24).

Table 24: Qualifications and NQF Levels of New Enrolment of 2022 PGDip EC Graduates

Qualification	NQF Level	Presently enrolled
Master of Science	9	1
Master of Philosophy in Emergency Medicine	9	3
Master of Business Administration	9	1
Bachelor of Applied Social Science (Majors: Psychology and Counselling)	8	1
Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Management	8	1
Degree in Business Management	7	1
Management and Leadership	7	1
Firefighting Qualification	7	1
Counselling for HIV and AIDS	6	1
Higher Certificate in Business Management	6	1

Of the 29 participants who responded, 14 indicated they planned to pursue further studies within two years after graduating. Table 25 contains the responses from the graduates who planned to continue their studies within the next two years.

Table 25: Responses of Those Who Plan to Study Within the Next Two Years

Participant	Planned Studies
P1	"I want to do a master's. I want to maybe go and do Mbchb (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery)"
P2	"Mphil in Emergency Care (Master of Philosophy in Emergency Medicine)"
P3	"MPhil or a Master's programme (Master of Philosophy)"
P4	"Mphil (Master of Philosophy)"
P5	"Expand on Fire qualification NFPA."
P6	"MMed in Emergency Medicine (Master of Medicine in Emergency Medicine)"
P7	"Something in management"

14.4.2 The 2023 PGDip EC questionnaire

Of the possible 27 participants, 14 responded, of which six indicated they were RPL candidates, and eight were non-RPL learners (Table 22). The preferences for support varied across categories. RPL candidates predominantly sought support from peers and the programme convenor, while non-RPL learners indicated they preferred lecturers and tutors. In order to address LMS challenges, RPL candidates favoured the programme convenor and tutors, whereas non-RPL learners utilised the LMS support centre and tutors. For theoretical challenges, RPL candidates primarily relied on peers and tutors, while non-RPL learners preferred lecturers and occasionally tutors. Non-RPL learners also indicated work colleagues assisted them with theoretical challenges (Table 26).

Table 26: Choices of Support for RPL and Non-RPL Learners

	Choices for support	RPL (6 respondents)	Non-RPL (8 respondents)
Academic concepts	Peers	3	2
	Tutor	1	2
	Lecturer	0	4
	Programme convenor	2	0
	Other	0	0
LMS challenges	Peers	1	0
	Tutor	2	2
	Lecturer	0	2
	Programme convenor	3	0
	Other	0	LMS support centre - 4
Theory challenges (such as understanding a theory concept)	Peers	4	0
	Tutor	3	1
	Lecturer	0	6
	Programme convenor	1	0
	Other	0	Work colleague - 1

14.5 The Developing Stage

This stage is discussed in Chapter 15, with the development of a framework of support and strategies to address the challenges and opportunities identified from participants' data.

14.6 The Reflecting Stage

The results show a reliance on social support systems among RPL and non-RPL candidates, despite the availability of university-provided support services. Few learners actively engaged with institutional resources such as the LMS support centre, and none indicated using the writing centre, suggesting a gap in the utilisation of formalised support structures. Instead, learners predominantly turned to peers, programme convenors, and lecturers for assistance, reflecting their preference for socially mediated learning environments.

This finding aligns with Vygotsky's theory of the MKO, where learners seek guidance from individuals they perceive as having greater expertise.² The reliance on peers and specific programme staff portrays social interactions and mediation's role in the learning process, central tenets of Vygotsky's SCT. According to this theory, learning occurs most effectively within the ZPD, a space where learners can accomplish tasks with the guidance of MKOs that they would otherwise be unable to achieve independently.³⁰ For both RPL and non-RPL learners, the support peers, convenors, and lecturers provide likely served to scaffold their learning, helping them progress beyond their current abilities and fostering confidence in their academic journey.^{30,91,04} However, the limited use of institutional resources raises questions about accessibility, awareness, or the perceived effectiveness of these services.

The reflecting stage concluded with the final report (Heading 14.7), which was submitted to the Division of Emergency Medicine, detailing the findings from the PAR cycles.

14.7 Executive Summary

This report was shared with the Division of Emergency Medicine as part of the ongoing PAR process within the PGDip EC.

Division of Emergency Medicine
University of Cape Town
Cape Town, South Africa

27 July 2022

To:

Associate Professor Clint Hendrikse
Head of Division: Emergency Medicine
University of Cape Town

Subject: Executive Summary of findings of PhD study

Dear A/ Professor Hendrikse

The report shares the findings of the researcher's PhD study, as agreed upon in the research proposal and with the Emergency Medicine Divisional Research Committee (EMDRC). The research was conducted between 2021 and 2023, focusing on the RPL process within the PGDip EC. The support needs of RPL candidates were explored by employing four studies, each using a different method.

Key highlights from the study are:

1. Institutional support is a crucial factor in promoting RPL candidates' success, as opposed to academic or individual support.
2. Tutors play a vital role in supporting RPL candidates, but the current model of the tutors being unpaid volunteers is not sustainable. More structured and dedicated support is required to ensure consistent assistance for learners.

3. The process creates an additional workload, but there appears to be immense personal and professional value to the RPL candidates who successfully complete the programme.
4. A central RPL support centre could offer dedicated guidance and resources to guide the RPL application process and ensure consistent, accessible support throughout learners' academic journey.

The report concludes with recommendations to enhance the PGDip EC programme. It aims to improve learning processes and available support to ensure that RPL candidates have the necessary resources to succeed in their postgraduate studies.

14.7.1 Background of emergency medical care education in South Africa

Emergency care education in South Africa has evolved over the last decade. Previously, paramedics could qualify as either a diploma or degree paramedic or were 'vocationally trained' through a short-course tiered system, progressing from basic life support to advanced life support.⁴ These certificate courses were not aligned with the NQF and were discontinued in 2018, meaning paramedics could no longer qualify or advance in emergency care education via vocational or short-course pathways.

Currently, the higher certificate and diploma qualifications in emergency medical care provide the exact scope of practice as that of the vocational paramedic.¹⁸⁷ However, individuals with vocational qualifications frequently face employment challenges, as employers often prioritise candidates with NQF credentials. To obtain an NQF qualification, vocational paramedics must return to full-time university studies for an undergraduate degree. This necessitates them giving up their job and income to pursue a two- to four-year programme, with the two-year diploma offering the exact scope of practice they already hold.

In 2021, UCT's Division of Emergency Medicine launched the PGDip EC, an NQF Level 8 qualification. Designed as a one-year interdisciplinary programme, it aimed to enhance medical professionals in emergency systems' knowledge, focusing on theory, clinical practice, research, and leadership, particularly benefiting those in rural settings. Its online delivery allows learners to continue working full-time, transcending

geographical barriers. The programme attracts doctors, degree paramedics, nurses, paramedics, and nurses from vocational backgrounds. Vocational practitioners can access the programme via an RPL portfolio process, enabling them to enter postgraduate education without having to start from scratch in undergraduate programmes, and it allows them to qualify at a higher NQF level.

14.7.2 PGDip EC RPL application and selection process

When RPL was rolled out within the Division, there were concerns both within and beyond the Division about the transition from traditional, classroom-based vocational training to an online postgraduate university qualification. Unlike traditional learners who progress through undergraduate studies, RPL candidates bypass the foundational phase that typically helps develop the academic skills necessary for university-level work.

RPL candidates apply to the PGDip EC through the standard application process. Upon receiving the applications, the programme convener emails all RPL candidates a portfolio consisting of three tasks and detailed background information. The submissions are assessed using a standardised rubric and a consensus document to ensure consistent evaluation. Based on their performance, RPL candidates are graded and shortlisted for selection. The convener then presents the RPL grading to the Divisional Exco, which serves as the official selection committee for the programme.

Throughout this research (2021–2023), the number of RPL applicants has steadily increased, with 60 to 70 portfolios submitted annually. Only the top applicants are accepted into the programme, making the selection process increasingly competitive. The portfolio marking is overseen by the convener, which adds to the additional workload involved in managing the RPL process. Beyond portfolio assessment, there is also additional work ensuring RPL candidates have clear information on the available university services. This further adds to the administrative demands of overseeing the RPL system.

Vocational learning centres on industry-driven practical and clinical skills and hands-on training, emphasising immediate application in the workplace. In contrast, postgraduate education requires a deeper theoretical understanding and academic

insight, including proficiency in research methods, academic writing, and engagement in scholarly discourse. This raised concerns that healthcare workers with vocational backgrounds may struggle to adapt to and navigate the complexities of university systems and processes. Moreover, there were questions about the wisdom of placing these individuals in the same classes as those who already possess undergraduate degrees and are more accustomed to the demands of university education.^{50,137}

14.7.3 The research

The identified questions and assumptions prompted the need for this research, with the primary aim being to develop a conceptual framework using a PAR approach to facilitate vocationally trained paramedics' transition into postgraduate studies in emergency medicine through RPL pathways. Various methods were used, with the main study being PAR (Table 1). The study population was vocationally trained paramedics enrolled in the PGDip EC between 2021 and 2023. Most of the participants resided in South Africa.

14.8 Key Research Findings (Study 1 and 2)

A descriptive literature review (Study 1) was conducted to determine the support needs of vocational learners transitioning into postgraduate education.¹³³ Various databases were searched, and the lack of literature on the prehospital RPL system in South Africa led to an expanded search into the field of health science internationally.

Three key themes of support were identified: individual, academic, and institutional, each with its own set of enablers and barriers. These themes emerged consistently during the semi-structured interviews conducted in Study 2 with the 2021 RPL candidates, which were analysed using thematic analysis. While all three themes were present, some were expressed more strongly than others.

14.8.1 Individual enablers and barriers

The literature review (Study 1) highlighted that the RPL process itself often serves as a crucial enabler, boosting self-confidence and motivation by validating the learners' previous experience and knowledge. Financial constraints, time management issues, and the fear of academic failure were common barriers noted in the literature.

Additionally, support structures, particularly family and peer networks, played a role in helping these learners navigate their academic journey, providing the necessary encouragement and a sense of belonging.

During the interviews with the 2021 RPL candidates (Study 2), these themes aligned with the findings from the literature review, with some nuances highlighted by the participants. The RPL process was an enabler for many participants, as it allowed them to access postgraduate education, something they previously thought unattainable. Peer and familial support were also crucial, as they helped create a supportive environment where RPL candidates could share challenges and advice. The flexibility of the online education format was particularly valued.

Despite these enablers, the RPL candidates reported challenges in balancing academic work with their professional and personal responsibilities. The demanding nature of the programme, coupled with inflexible work schedules, often led to stress and sacrifices in personal time, particularly time with family. Many RPL candidates expressed low self-esteem and a fear of failure. These feelings were rooted in apprehensions about their qualifications compared to their peers and negative past educational experiences. The phrase “not good enough” was frequently mentioned, reflecting the beliefs many had before their acceptance into the PGDip EC.

14.8.2 Academic enablers and barriers

The reviewed literature (Study 1) revealed that vocational learners encounter notable academic challenges as they transition into postgraduate studies. Many struggle in shifting from practical, experience-based learning to higher education’s more theoretical and research-focused demands. Common difficulties include academic writing and language barriers, especially for those whose previous education did not emphasise these skills. The challenge of “relearning how to study” is particularly pronounced for those returning to education. Additionally, the assumption that postgraduate learners possess a certain level of technological proficiency can be a barrier as they may not have had the opportunity to develop these skills during their vocational training. While the flexibility of online programmes can be beneficial, it introduces new technological challenges.

An analysis of the semi-structured interviews with the 2021 RPL candidates (Study 2) reinforced these views of academic challenges. The flexibility of online education emerged as an enabler, allowing learners to engage with course material at their own pace.

The barriers identified were particularly in academic writing, literacy, and technology. Many participants, especially those whose first language was not English, struggled to express complex ideas in writing. This challenge was compounded by their lack of prior training in academic writing. Additionally, adapting to the technological demands of online learning presented further difficulties. Some participants faced issues with reliable access to technology, such as up-to-date computers and stable internet connections, when studying at remote sites.

14.8.3 Institutional enablers and barriers

The literature review (Study 1) revealed that many RPL learners experience difficulties in navigating university systems and understanding the institutional culture. The lack of orientation to these systems often led to confusion and frustration. Vocational learners are usually unfamiliar with the multi-layered structure of HEIs, where responsibilities are divided among various departments. This contrasts with their previous educational experiences, where a single educator often managed most aspects of training. The confusion arising from this unfamiliar structure can result in delays and a perceived lack of support. While most universities offer multiple support services to aid in this transition, the literature suggests that these services are underutilised by RPL learners, indicating a need for better communication and orientation strategies.

The interviews with the 2021 RPL candidates (Study 2) reflected these institutional challenges while shedding light on the specific enablers and barriers participants experienced. Divisional support and a well-structured programme were crucial enablers in facilitating a positive educational experience. Participants appreciated the responsiveness of programme staff and the clear progression of the curriculum, which provided them with a sense of stability and direction throughout their studies. The structured and supportive environment was thus key to their success, as it helped them navigate the complexities of the academic system more effectively.

The barriers raised were related to the need for more familiarity with university culture. Many participants expressed a preference for direct communication with the programme convenor, a practice carried over from their vocational training where a single educator often served as the main point of contact. This reliance on familiar structures led to the underutilisation of broader institutional support services, further complicating their adaptation to the university environment. These results were supported in the questionnaires sent to the 2022 RPL cohort (as part of Study 2); this reliance makes the RPL process work-heavy and adds to the programme convenor's pressure during the programme itself.

14.8.4 Grades and academic performance

In Study 2, an analysis of the grades from the 2021 and 2022 cohorts revealed notable performance trends. A 4% difference between RPL and non-RPL candidates was observed over the two years, as summarised in Table 10 and Table 27.

Table 27: Grade comparison of the 2021 and 2022 cohorts

Cohort of PGDip EC	Number of candidates per cohort per year		Grade average per cohort per year	
	2021	2022	2021	2022
RPL candidates	10	21	69%	68%
Non-RPL candidates	13	9	73%	72%

14.8.5 PAR cycles (Study 3)

PAR is a collaborative research approach that actively involves participants in the research process. Unlike traditional research methods, PAR emphasises the co-creation of knowledge, where researchers and participants work together to identify issues, develop solutions, and implement changes. PAR is iterative, with ongoing reflection and action cycles that help refine individuals' understanding of the problem and the strategies for addressing it.

This methodology was chosen for this study to ensure that the voices and experiences of vocationally trained paramedics were central to developing a conceptual framework to facilitate vocationally trained paramedics' transition into postgraduate studies in emergency medicine through RPL pathways. By involving these participants directly in the research process, the study could address their real-world challenges more effectively and co-create practical solutions tailored to their needs.

14.8.5.1 Cycle one

Data from studies 1 and 2 informed the design of the first PAR cycle. The tutors emerged as a vital support aspect, and from 2021 to 2022, the number of tutors increased from two to six. Initially, it was envisioned that the tutors would primarily support RPL candidates; however, to ensure equity, all learners in the PGDip EC were included in the tutor groups. Participation with the tutors was voluntary, allowing learners to engage as needed. The cohort was divided into groups and allocated a tutor for the year. Although the support was initially intended to be academic, it became apparent that the tutors also addressed institutional and administrative needs. This

additional support layer benefited the learners and helped relieve the pressure on the programme convener and lecturing staff.

During the reflection phase of this cycle, a semi-structured group interview was conducted with the tutors to identify areas where additional support was needed. Three key findings emerged:

1. Learners were contacting tutors outside of regular office hours now that a direct communication channel was available (WhatsApp).
2. Learners sought assistance from tutors in areas beyond the programme's academic content, including administrative, technological, institutional, and emotional support.
3. The phenomenon of 'tutor-hopping' was observed, where learners, despite being assigned to specific tutors, approached other tutors for content and assignment-related questions, particularly close to submission deadlines.

Communication within a tutor and programme team WhatsApp group was monitored over three months to support the tutors. An adapted safety cross was used to record the timing and content of these interactions. This tracking confirmed that communication often occurred outside regular hours, with noticeable increases before assignment deadlines and during weekends. This trend was noted across all learners in the 2022 PGDip EC programme.

14.8.5.2 Cycle two

Due to the growing reliance on tutors, concerns about learners frequently moving between tutors, and the expectations learners had from their tutors, the second PAR cycle focused on developing a Tutor Student Charter. This charter was envisioned as a contract between tutors and learners, outlining appropriate times and channels of communication. Tutors could complete the charter, specifying their availability, and share it with their groups at the beginning of the PGDip EC programme. The charter would then serve as a reference point if a learner attempted to communicate outside the specified times. Despite introducing the charter, monthly questionnaires conducted with tutors over three months revealed that learners communicated outside the designated times. However, there was a noted decrease in reliance on tutors for pre-

submission assignment assessments. Nevertheless, RPL candidates continued to depend more heavily on tutors for information beyond the programme's scope compared to non-RPL candidates.

14.8.5.3 Cycle three

The third PAR cycle involved two online questionnaires: one for the 2022 PGDip EC cohort and another for the 2023 PGDip EC cohort. For the 2022 cohort, an online questionnaire was distributed in 2023 to determine whether any learners had registered for new NQF qualifications. Of the 29 respondents, 12 indicated they had enrolled in another programme (of which five were RPL candidates), with all these programmes registered within the NQF framework.

The online questionnaire for the 2023 cohort explored which university support services learners utilised during their studies. The results revealed that, aside from the library, no other support services were used throughout the year. Many learners, particularly the RPL candidates, still demonstrated a strong reliance on the programme convenor, often preferring this support over the allocated tutor. This persistent pattern highlights the ongoing challenge of transitioning learners from a centralised support model to more distributed university resources.

Upon reflection, the findings of this research can be applied beyond the RPL candidates and translated to the support needs of non-RPL learners as well. While it was initially expected that RPL candidates would have additional support needs due to their vocational backgrounds, the research revealed that their needs were similar to those of traditional learners. Both groups benefit from the same foundational support structures, though RPL learners may require some additional orientation to adjust to the academic and institutional demands.

14.9 Summary of Research Findings

1. Contrary to academics' beliefs, the RPL candidates require institutional and system support rather than academic support. The literature supports this finding.
2. The tutors stood central to the RPL process, and it should be noted that voluntary assistance is not a sustainable or feasible option, and it carries risk as these tutors are not employees of the university.
3. The RPL candidates' support needs can be translated to all learners, focusing on a concise orientation programme for the RPL candidates.
4. The PGDip EC programme has successfully enabled vocational learners to pursue further education, with several graduates enrolling in additional studies within the NQF.

14.10 Recommendations

In conclusion of the PhD studies, the following divisional strategies are recommended:

1. Offer targeted academic support

- a. Continue with the tutor groups, which provide peer and tutor support, but clear boundaries are required.
- b. Reinforce university support services to increase awareness.

2. Support services awareness and reinforcement

- a. Enhance orientation programmes; to capacitate online learners, the orientation should include detailed walkthrough videos, introductions to key support services, and guidance on navigating online platforms.
- b. To reinforce this information and provide continued support, regular announcements on the LMS can be made to remind learners of support services.

3. Additional support

- a. A dedicated staff member or RPL support centre should oversee the RPL application and portfolio process and provide feedback.

- b. Portfolio feedback to unsuccessful RPL applicants will support these applicants in reapplying and reduce applicant loss.
- c. While the RPL process is beneficial and positive, running an RPL process adds to the overall workload. This should be anticipated and planned for beforehand to ensure a smoother process.

14.11 Conclusion

The findings suggest that the challenges RPL candidates face were less distinct than initially thought. Support needs, such as academic writing and technological proficiency, are common to a broader range of learners. At the same time, RPL candidates required extra guidance in transitioning from vocational to academic settings, though their needs primarily aligned with those of other postgraduate learners.

The RPL process highlighted the crucial role of institutional and system support, with tutors playing a key role in bridging gaps. However, the reliance on tutors by both RPL and non-RPL learners suggests a need for more formalised and sustainable support structures. These findings emphasise the importance of reinforcing university support services and ensuring they are accessible to all learners.

The PGDip EC programme has facilitated vocational learners' transition into postgraduate education while demonstrating that its support systems can benefit a wider learner body. This has led to a more comprehensive understanding of emergency care education learning needs, fostering personal and professional growth across the field.

SECTION 4

The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework

CHAPTER 15: The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework

15.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses objective four of the research and builds upon the findings of the previous studies by exploring vocational paramedics' support needs while transitioning from vocational education to postgraduate study. The transition from vocational education to university-level learning was conceptualised through Vygotsky's SCT, which emphasises the interplay between tools, rules, and community in the process of learning and movement within the ZPD.^{2,30} Vygotsky's SCT underpinned the development of the conceptual framework (Figure 23). This theoretical lens provides a valuable foundation for understanding the dynamic support learners require as they navigate this transition.^{12,31,39}

This research utilised various tools to explore the support needs of vocational paramedics entering postgraduate education, including questionnaires, the HMLSQ, and interviews (Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 14). For example, in Study 2, the HMLSQ assisted in identifying learners' preferences and strategies, enabling them to align their learning approaches with academic expectations.^{26,28,85,119} For the vocational paramedics, this tool may have helped to bridge practical knowledge with the theoretical demands of university education. The research began with a central question: What support do these learners require and what challenges they would experience during transition. Findings suggested that while they could benefit from structured academic support, their biggest challenges lay in negotiating institutional culture, balancing workload, and building confidence in an unfamiliar university environment. While these insights emerged from vocational paramedics admitted through RPL, the issues identified may be generalisable to other postgraduate students who enter higher education from non-traditional pathways.

Rules, as described in Vygotsky's SCT and applied in this research, refer to the norms, guidelines, and institutional policies that shape the learning environment.² The Tutor Student Charter (PAR cycle two) provided structured boundaries that defined roles and responsibilities within the academic environment (Chapter 13). Acting as

regulatory scaffolds, these rules delineated expectations, helping learners internalise academic norms and adapt to the complexities of postgraduate education.² By providing consistency and predictability, these frameworks supported learners in mastering new academic environments.^{12,18,103}

Community, encompassing tutors, academic staff, peers, and family, emerged as an enabler in this transition. For the vocational paramedic, peer interactions fostered collaborative learning, mutual support, and the co-construction of knowledge, reinforcing Vygotsky's emphasis on the social nature of learning.^{30,31} Family support, both emotional and logistical, offered stability during the shift from vocational to academic contexts, acting as a buffer against the stresses of adaptation.^{17,188} Additionally, institutional communities, including tutors and academic staff, enriched this process by offering mentorship and fostering a supportive environment facilitating integration into academic life.^{13,18}

Despite these enabling factors, this research also identified several barriers vocational paramedics face when transitioning into postgraduate studies. These included deficits in academic writing skills, limited connectivity and technology use proficiency, and difficulties adjusting to the university culture.^{1,17} Such challenges align with broader findings on the transitional difficulties vocational learners encounter in higher education settings, particularly in adapting to academic literacies and technological literacies.^{12,16} These areas of difficulty highlight where support interventions are required. While tools, rules, and community provide foundational enablers, the areas of deficit necessitate scaffolding to address the identified barriers.

The interconnectedness of tools, rules, and community is illustrated in Figure 2, which emphasises their combined role in facilitating learning within Vygotsky's ZPD. This research builds upon these foundations by incorporating Wood's concept of scaffolding, which offers a structured approach to addressing barriers and enablers.^{11,31} The scaffolding framework should focus on equipping learners with the skills and strategies necessary to overcome their challenges while continuing to reinforce the strengths of existing enablers supporting transition.^{24,188}

The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework was conceptualised around the idea of the learner bridging a gap from vocational practice to postgraduate study (Figure 23). It provides a context-informed approach to understanding and supporting the transition of vocational paramedics into postgraduate education, while also highlighting strategies that may hold relevance for the broader student cohort. Although neither Vygotsky nor Wood explicitly used the metaphor of a “bridge” or “bridging”, the concept aligns closely with their theoretical principles.^{2,11} Vygotsky’s ZPD and Wood’s scaffolding theory emphasise the importance of MKOs providing structured support, gradually enabling the learner to develop autonomy.^{2,11,30} The “bridge” metaphor encapsulates these ideas by conceptualising the transition as a connection between a learner’s current level of understanding and the competencies they can achieve through mediation, support, and collaborative engagement.

The conceptual framework visualises this transition as a bridge (Figure 23), with one side representing the vocational education system and the other higher education. Vocational learning is characterised by practical, hands-on training aimed at immediate job readiness, whereas higher education emphasises theoretical understanding and lifelong learning.^{7,17,49} By identifying and leveraging the tools, rules, and community structures within both systems, this framework could provide the scaffolding necessary for vocational paramedics to cross the educational bridge.

15.2 Methodological Approach to the Framework Development

The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework was developed through an iterative process that combined empirical evidence with theoretical constructs. Strong frameworks are often the product of reasoning that moves between data and theory, where empirical findings and theoretical insights are repeatedly compared and refined until a coherent model takes shape¹⁹⁴.

This framework was not developed in a single step but evolved across three PAR cycles. Each cycle generated insights into learners’ challenges and enablers, with interventions such as the Tutor Student Charter serving as practical outputs that informed successive refinements. The final framework represents the cumulative integration of these cycles. Data from the grade analysis (Chapter 8), semi-structured

interviews (Chapter 9), tutor discussions (Chapter 13), and cohort questionnaires (Chapter 14) were synthesised thematically. The themes were then systematically mapped onto Vygotsky's concepts of tools, rules, and community, as well as Wood's scaffolding model, which provided the organising principles for the framework. This process reflects an iterative approach in which both theory-driven and data-driven elements shape the outcome ^{194,195}.

Following the recommendations of methodological literature, the framework was constructed by first identifying the key concepts, then defining them clearly, reviewing relevant theories, and visually representing the relationships among them (Figure 23)¹⁹⁶⁻¹⁹⁸. Building on this methodological process, the framework is articulated through the acronym SCAFFOLD, which captures the essential elements of support.

Thus, the methodological development of the Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework can be understood as both descriptive, in that it reflects the lived experiences of vocational learners, and prescriptive, in that it proposes structured interventions to scaffold transitions into postgraduate education.

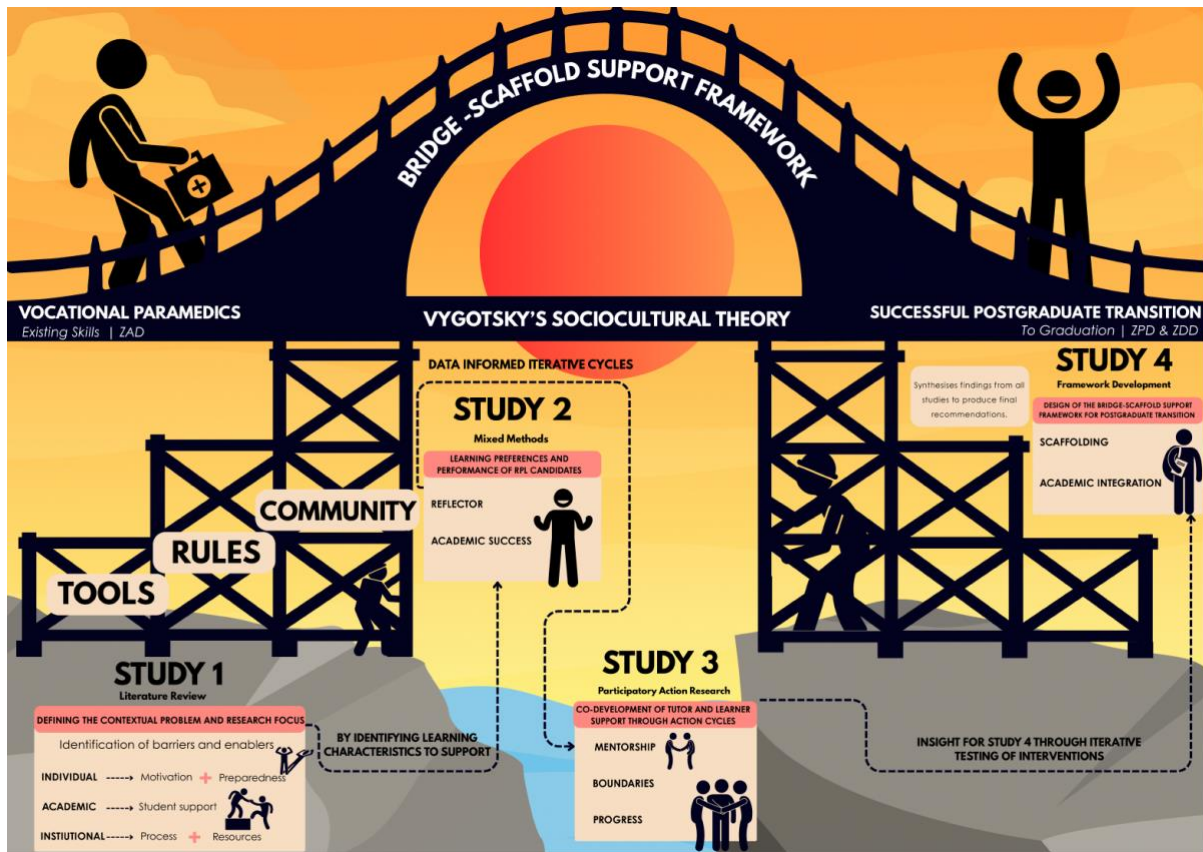


Figure 23: The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework

15.2 The Bridge-Scaffold: Supporting the Transition

The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework is conceptualised as a tool to facilitate vocational learners' transition into university education by providing support that aligns with their specific needs. As part of the framework, the acronym 'SCAFFOLD' encapsulates the key elements of this support system. Each letter in 'SCAFFOLD' builds on the barriers, enablers, and challenges identified throughout this research.

- **S** – Structured Support: Provide clear, organised systems of support, including academic guidance, mentoring, and resources.
- **C** – Community Integration: Foster a sense of belonging by connecting learners with peers, faculty, and campus initiatives.
- **A** – Academic Acumen: Develop academic literacy and research skills to meet university standards.

- **F** – Flexible Learning: Offer flexible learning options, such as online courses, to accommodate diverse needs.
- **F** – Feedback and Reflection: Provide continuous, constructive feedback and encourage reflective practices.
- **O** – Opportunities for Growth: Create personal and professional development opportunities, like internships and workshops.
- **L** – Lifelong Learning: Instil a mindset of lifelong learning that extends beyond formal education.
- **D** – Dedicated Resources: Ensure access to academic support services, mental health programmes, and financial aid.

Table 28 summarises the Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework, detailing recommendations aligned with Vygotsky’s concepts of tools, rules, and community. This approach emphasises the integration of practical resources, meaningful social interactions, and structured learning practices to effectively scaffold and support learners.

Table 28: Recommendations for the Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework

Acronym	Brief Explanation	Recommendation	Link to Vygotsky’s Tools, Rules and Community
S – Structured Support	Clear, organised support systems tailored to individual needs with a focus on redress and social equity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assign academic mentors for ongoing guidance. - Conduct workshops on essential skills (e.g., academic writing, research). - Offer structured learning pathways that address educational disadvantages. - Create targeted tutor groups with clear boundaries. 	Tools: Mentors, academic resources, and structured pathways to guide learning.
C – Community Integration	Building a sense of belonging through active engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish peer mentoring programmes to connect learners. 	Community: Peer and faculty networks fostering inclusion and active participation.

Acronym	Brief Explanation	Recommendation	Link to Vygotsky's Tools, Rules and Community
	with peers and faculty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourage participation in academic and social activities. - Ensure faculty engagement in creating equitable learning experiences. - Enhance awareness of support services. 	
A – Academic Acumen	Development of academic literacy and research skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offer academic writing support through workshops. - Introduce exercises early. 	Tools: Resources like writing centres and exercises.
F – Flexible Learning	Accommodate diverse needs with online and in-person learning options.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offer blended-learning courses accessible after hours. - Ensure detailed orientation for online learners with walkthroughs. 	Tools: Digital platforms and flexible course structures.
F – Feedback and Reflection	Continuous, constructive feedback and self-assessment practices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide timely and detailed academic feedback. - Incorporate reflective practices like journals. - Provide portfolio feedback for RPL applicants. 	Rules: Feedback and reflection practices that guide self-improvement and learning behaviour.
O – Opportunities for Growth	Personal and professional development beyond academics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conduct career-focused workshops (e.g., leadership, communication). - Offer internships and work experience programmes. 	Community: Professional networks and workplace integration opportunities.
L – Lifelong Learning	Cultivate a mindset of continuous education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourage engagement in professional development. - Teach self-directed learning strategies. - Establish alumni networks. 	Community: Alumni networks supporting ongoing learning and professional growth.

Acronym	Brief Explanation	Recommendation	Link to Vygotsky's Tools, Rules and Community
D – Dedicated Resources	Access to academic, mental health, and financial aid resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide targeted support services for marginalised groups. - Offer mental health programmes sensitive to diverse cultural needs. - Provide financial aid initiatives aimed at levelling the playing field. 	Tools: Access to resources like mental health services and financial aid.

This framework addresses vocational paramedics transitioning to postgraduate studies' needs by drawing on Vygotsky's principles of social learning. It highlights the importance of understanding learners' cultural and historical contexts to create responsive and adaptable educational interventions. While initially developed for vocational paramedics, the framework has the potential to address broader educational transitions, offering solutions that foster inclusivity and effective learning across diverse learner populations. Ultimately, it aims to provide structured support and scaffolding to equip all learners for success in academically rigorous environments.

SECTION 5

Discussion, Recommendations, Limitations and Conclusion

CHAPTER 16: Discussion

16.1 Introduction

This research explored the support needs of vocational paramedics transitioning into higher education through RPL for access, focusing on the PGDip EC programme at UCT. A mixed-methods approach was employed, comprising three PAR cycles alongside additional tools such as questionnaires, the HMLSQ, and interviews. The study examined enablers and barriers across individual, academic, and institutional dimensions, and concluded with the development of a conceptual support framework that integrated these findings.

Across the sub-studies in this larger project, the findings suggest that while some support needs of RPL candidates were similar to those of traditionally admitted learners, important differences were also evident. RPL learners reported challenges with academic literacies, digital access, and navigating institutional processes, areas where undergraduates would typically gain gradual exposure during earlier stages of study. Entering directly at postgraduate level meant that RPL candidates confronted these demands without the benefit of prior university experience, which amplified the cognitive demand of the transition. As a result, they were required to manage advanced academic tasks while simultaneously adapting to institutional systems and technologies.

It is also important to recognise that success in postgraduate study extends beyond academic achievement alone, encompassing professional development, personal growth, and sustained engagement with lifelong learning. Underpinned by Vygotsky's SCT, this research emphasised the dynamic interaction of tools, rules, and community in shaping vocational paramedics' learning experiences.² These acted as mediators in the academic transition, facilitating the integration of vocational expertise's integration into academic frameworks, and bridging gaps between prior experiential knowledge and formal educational expectations.^{2,86}

Vocational learning in South Africa has historically provided a pathway for individuals to acquire industry-specific skills through practical, hands-on training programmes, but professions within healthcare have faced challenges in aligning vocational skills with NQF-compliant qualifications.^{39,99} Changes in educational policy and professional standards have necessitated a shift toward higher education as a prerequisite for continued academic and professional progression.^{7,10} However, for many vocational paramedics, systemic barriers impede this transition. Some lack the formal qualifications required for entry into higher education, while others, constrained by full-time employment responsibilities, find traditional, full-time undergraduate studies unattainable.^{4,13}

While RPL offers vocational paramedics an opportunity to transition to higher education, pursuing the two-year Diploma in Emergency Medical Care leads to a qualification offering the same scope of practice that paramedics already possess.^{4,7,10,33} This paradox highlights that while RPL facilitates access, vocational paramedics aiming for academic and career progression face the prospect of having to undertake full-time undergraduate studies, often spanning three or more years.⁵¹ Many postgraduate programmes exist, but to the researcher's knowledge, the PGDip EC is currently the only postgraduate programme in emergency care offered in South Africa.⁹ The programme was initially developed without specific consideration for vocational paramedics but later opened its doors to them by integrating RPL as an admission pathway. This shift allowed vocational paramedics to advance their qualifications without needing extended undergraduate study.

16.2 The Concept of Success

To revisit the research question, *“Can vocational paramedics succeed in a postgraduate programme such as the PGDip EC?”* it is important to reiterate the previously established definition of success within this context (Chapter 4). In this study, ‘success’ encompasses outcomes broadly defined as vocational learners achieving intended aims or purposes.

16.3 Individual Transition

From the perspective of academic success, the answer to the research question is unequivocally yes. This research demonstrated that vocational paramedics achieved comparable grades to their non-RPL counterparts, as evidenced by the analysis of the PGDip EC 2021 and 2022 cohort grades (Table 10). Completing the programme validated the effectiveness of RPL as a pathway to postgraduate education.¹⁰ Yet, success can extend beyond academic results, involving transformations such as enhanced self-worth and professional growth while integrating new knowledge into practice.^{108,109,185}

Drawing from the RPL interviews (Chapter 9) and 2023 PGDip EC graduate questionnaires (Chapter 14), vocational paramedics reported personal and professional growth during the PGDip EC. Self-actualisation and improvements on their existing body of knowledge, initially identified as personal motivators in the descriptive literature review, were confirmed in the RPL candidate interviews. The sense of self-actualisation is connected to human agency, described as ‘a way to see and be seen’ (Chapter 4), describing self-worth and belonging.⁴² Quantifying this personal development is difficult; each learner has personal goals and aspirations. However, the concept of professional acceptance emerged prominently in both the literature review and RPL interviews. It appears that the perception of being unable to progress academically or ‘keep up’ with the new NQF-aligned qualifications may obscure the value that each vocational paramedic contributes to the profession.

The need to feel valued and be accepted is intrinsic to the social being, a concept validated by Vygotsky’s emphasis on social interaction.^{2,20,21} Vygotsky’s SCT posits that learning and personal growth are embedded in social contexts, where individuals co-construct knowledge through interactions with others.² Whether academic or professional, acceptance within a community reinforces an individual’s sense of belonging and self-worth, which are essential for motivation and engagement. For the RPL candidates, the opportunity to have something to show for their years of experience validated their vocational journey (Chapter 9). Additionally, participation in multidisciplinary teams further enhanced these feelings (Chapter 9).

This trend was further illustrated by some PGDip EC graduates enrolling in new NQF qualifications, with a few studying levels higher than the PGDip EC NQF 8, while others were actively planning further studies (Table 25). Additionally, some graduates joined the tutoring programme, contributing to the support structures that may have facilitated their own success (Chapter 12). This sustained engagement with education, and the academic community portrays their progression within the ZPD as they transition from receiving scaffolded support to becoming providers of guidance themselves, a core tenet of Vygotsky's SCT.²

16.3.1 Opportunities, access and support

RPL has emerged as a transformative tool in educational systems worldwide, enabling individuals to progress in their academic and professional careers based on their prior knowledge and practical experience.^{44,100,191} As a national strategy for inclusivity and equity, RPL bridges systemic gaps, providing vocational paramedics access to postgraduate programmes like the PGDip EC and fostering their validation and inclusion within the academic community.¹⁰ Beyond mere access, RPL also acts as an enabler of personal and professional growth, supporting self-efficacy and reinforcing professional identities (Chapter 4).

The interviews with RPL candidates and the PGDip EC cohort questionnaire illustrate that RPL not only aligns with the broader goals of national educational equity and workforce development but also equips learners to navigate the challenges of transitioning to higher education. The RPL process serves as an initial scaffold, offering support and validation even before learners engage with formal theoretical content. According to Vygotsky's SCT and the concept of the ZPD, this foundational scaffolding is essential for effective learning and smooth transitions into academic environments.⁹¹ For vocational paramedics, RPL demonstrates their capabilities within their ZAD, validating their existing expertise while preparing them for the cognitive demands of more complex academic challenges (Chapter 9). This process affirms their professional background and aligns with Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding, where structured initial support facilitates progression and independent achievement.²

16.4 Academic Transition

An academic challenge was identified in the literature review, rooted in the nature of vocational paramedic training in South Africa, particularly the historical short-course training model. While this training equips vocational learners with strong procedural problem-solving skills (essential for EMS contexts), it does not adequately prepare them for postgraduate studies' theoretical and academic demands.^{39,52,190} Tasks such as academic writing, a concept not addressed in the practically oriented vocational training, proved challenging for vocational paramedics.¹ This issue was reiterated during interviews, where some RPL candidates expressed unfamiliarity with academic writing as a practice (Chapter 9). Similarly, tutors noted in the group discussion that some candidates had sought clarity on this concept (Chapter 13). For many RPL candidates, the absence of prior undergraduate education compounded these challenges, as learning a new academic language required time and effort, particularly for those whose home language was not English (Chapter 9).

This transition from vocational to academic environments for the RPL candidate can be conceptualised as a movement within the ZPD. Here, learners rely on scaffolding to bridge the gap between their existing procedural knowledge and the theoretical and analytical skills demanded by postgraduate studies.² For these RPL candidates, the MKO played a dual role as both a mentor and a facilitator of learning, providing the structured support necessary to address knowledge and skill gaps, enabling candidates to meet the academic demands of the PGDip EC programme.

16.4.1 *Honey and Mumford learning styles*

The HMLSQ formed part of an early course to help learners see how they best assimilate information. Designed to help learners select learning activities aligned with their preferred styles during the academic year, the results revealed a predominant Reflector learning style (Figures 8-10). While this finding aligns with existing literature in healthcare, little evidence was available on the learning styles of vocational learners.

The discovery that the Activist style was the least common among vocational paramedics presented an intriguing contradiction for the researcher. Given the high-

stakes, practical decision-making aspects inherent in their vocational backgrounds, one might expect a stronger alignment with Activist traits. However, the predominance of the Reflector style suggests an adaptation process, reflecting adult learning theories that highlight a transition from practical to reflective learning as professionals advance in their careers. Kolb argues that as individuals engage in academic settings, they tend to develop more reflective learning styles, which are essential for theoretical analysis and deeper engagement with complex concepts.^{119,129} Additionally, research shows that learning styles often evolve as learners progress from undergraduate to postgraduate education, where Reflector traits may become more dominant.¹²⁹

The analysis revealed that the Reflector learning style was the predominant style among all the PGDip EC learners in 2021 and 2022. This, along with the minor disparity in grades between the two cohorts, illustrates that the learning approaches are similar. Honey and Mumford suggest that learners may adapt their learning styles to meet the expectations of academic contexts that prioritise reflection over action.²⁸ This raises the possibility that RPL candidates successfully adjusted their learning strategies to align with the academic demands of postgraduate education.

Illeris emphasises the necessity of aligning educational designs with learners' backgrounds, warning that mismatches can hinder the effective use of natural learning preferences.⁸⁶ In the PGDip EC programme, the strong emphasis on academic reflection and theoretical engagement appropriately aligns with the Reflector learning style, making the programme's structure particularly suitable for these learners. The online format further supports Reflectors, encouraging independent study and in-depth engagement with course materials, fostering an environment where they can thrive.⁹

16.4.2 Academic performance

One of the study's objectives was to examine the RPL candidates' progress. The academic performance of RPL candidates compared to their non-RPL peers presents vocational learners' academic competence in this postgraduate setting. As outlined in Chapter 8, the analysis revealed only a 4% difference in grade averages between the groups (Table 10). While seemingly minor, this grade disparity has meaningful implications for the academic trajectory of RPL candidates. It supports the efficacy of

RPL as a mechanism for transitioning vocational learners into higher education. The closeness of the grades to those of non-RPL candidates also highlights vocational learners' academic readiness, suggesting that the current RPL process successfully bridges the gap into higher education and positions these learners to meet the academic expectations of postgraduate studies.

RPL candidates consistently met foundational benchmarks and demonstrated competencies aligned with the expectations of an NQF Level 8 programme. Their performance, which closely parallels that of their non-RPL peers, affirms the value of recognising vocational and experiential learning as credible indicators of academic potential. This alignment highlights the RPL process's role in bridging vocational expertise and the academic rigour required for success in postgraduate education. These outcomes invite further exploration into how RPL frameworks can be refined and expanded to enhance inclusivity and equity in higher education.

16.5 Institutional Transition

The descriptive literature review depicts the institutional landscape as a challenge for RPL candidates (Chapter 4). A well-documented contributor to undergraduate transition is the first-year experience, which encompasses structured orientation activities and academic induction sessions designed to help learners acclimate to university life.^{19,20} These initiatives introduce learners to the institution's culture, familiarise them with available support resources, and set clear expectations for academic success.^{18,19} However, such structured support is less common at the postgraduate level, where the assumption is that learners have already navigated these processes during their undergraduate studies.^{16,23}

This expectation creates a gap for RPL candidates entering postgraduate education as they bypass the undergraduate experience entirely.^{1,42} Consequently, they are not exposed to foundational university practices or introduced to the array of departmental and support structures available. This gap was evident in the findings from the PGDip EC 2022 questionnaire, where many respondents indicated a preference for contacting the programme convenor or tutors rather than engaging directly with the appropriate institutional channels or departments. This behaviour reflects a reliance

on familiar, centralised support figures, which mirrors the mentorship-driven approach of vocational training environments (Chapter 14).

Despite being informed about academic resources during the Introduction to Postgraduates Studies course in the PGDip EC, as well as having access to freely available resources on the university website, the questionnaires revealed that none of the participants utilised these services. This raises the question of whether RPL candidates were unaware of the full benefits of these resources or if the demands of online learning and rigorous coursework left them overwhelmed and unable to engage effectively. Balancing professional responsibilities, academic commitments, and personal obligations creates additional pressures, often leaving little capacity for navigating institutional support systems.

While existing literature highlights the successful use of university support services, the study's findings depict that such success is not uniformly experienced in the PGDip EC.^{16,22} These results highlight the need to adapt support structures to better serve online postgraduate learners, offering more accessible and proactive solutions. From Vygotsky's perspective, RPL candidates' limited engagement with institutional support structures can be understood through the concept of the ZPD and the essential role of scaffolding. Vygotsky's theory emphasises that learning is most effective when supported by MKOs within a collaborative community, enabling learners to transition from independently manageable tasks to those requiring guided assistance.^{31,91} For RPL candidates, tutors could have fulfilled this role, providing scaffolding that bridged academic gaps.

The research also revealed that RPL candidates are embedded in strong networks of family, friends, and colleagues, which offer a deep sense of security and belonging (Chapter 4). This community-based support reflects the structure of vocational paramedical programmes, characterised by clear hierarchies and mentor-led learning (Chapter 2). Vygotsky's SCT provides insight into this reliance on mentor-led environments, where structured guidance is paramount.² However, this dependency, while aligning with Vygotsky's concept of MKOs, highlights a limitation: the centralised, mentor-dependent model can hinder the development of self-directed academic skills crucial for higher education.

The PGDip EC 2022 cohort questionnaire data supported this finding, with RPL candidates frequently seeking the programme convenor's assistance, even for non-academic matters. This behaviour reflects the para-militaristic structure of vocational education, where centralised authority figures oversee learning.^{13,100,192} While this approach offers comfort and efficacy, it inadequately prepares learners for the independence and self-regulation required in a university setting, complicating their transition to a more autonomous academic environment.

The online learning modality exacerbates this issue by failing to replicate the communal learning environment Vygotsky deemed critical for cognitive development. On-campus learners benefit from real-time interactions, shared experiences, and immediate feedback, fostering a sense of belonging. In contrast, online learners often struggle to form meaningful connections, diminishing the social aspects of learning and leaving RPL candidates to face academic demands in isolation. This concern is particularly acute as many RPL candidates entered the programme with pre-existing self-doubt about their academic abilities (Chapter 9). Integrated support systems that foster community, equip RPL learners with resources, and balance mentorship with opportunities to cultivate independence are required to address these limitations.

16.6 Inclusion through PAR

PAR aims to give participants a voice, ensuring that those most affected by research outcomes actively shape the processes and findings.^{149,156,162} In this study, PAR was instrumental in gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges RPL candidates faced throughout the programme. The participatory process, however, did not follow a traditional model of continuous co-researcher involvement. Instead, an indirect form of PAR was adopted, where learner voices were incorporated at defined choice points rather than requiring constant participation.¹⁶² This approach reduced the burden on RPL candidates, who were simultaneously managing postgraduate study and professional responsibilities, while still ensuring that their perspectives shaped the interventions. Tutors and the programme convenor played a key role in mediating insights and carrying them forward into programme-level changes. In this way, indirect

PAR maintained the ethos of participation while adapting the methodology to the realities of the learner context.

The introduction of the Tutor Student Charter in the PGDip EC programme reflects an application of Vygotsky's concept of rules within his SCT (Chapter 13). Vygotsky emphasised that learning occurs within a structured social and cultural framework, where rules and norms guide interactions and shape the learning process.² This research demonstrated that tutors were perceived as valuable MKOs; however, it also highlighted the importance of protecting their time and availability to prevent burnout and ensure the sustained quality of support. The charter achieved this by clearly communicating boundaries and defining appropriate channels for assistance, balancing the needs of learners with the well-being of tutors. By delineating appropriate channels for assistance and establishing clear boundaries on availability, the charter reinforced tutors' roles as MKOs while encouraging learners to develop self-directed academic skills.² This approach aligns with Vygotsky's assertion that structured guidance should address immediate learning needs and promote independence as learners progress within their ZPD.³⁰

16.7 The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework

The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework, developed from the findings of this research, focuses on fostering independence among vocational paramedics transitioning to postgraduate studies (Chapter 15). It leverages the identified rules, tools, and community to help learners navigate their transition from vocational expertise (ZAD) to their potential development within the PGDip EC programme (ZPD). With structured support from the framework and guidance from MKOs, learners can progressively advance through their ZPD, building the skills and knowledge needed for academic success.

As learners advance, the bridge or scaffolding can be systematically deconstructed, allowing the learner to determine when and where they require support. This scaffolding may then be repurposed to assist in new areas of learning, reflecting its dynamic and adaptable nature. Thus, this Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework is adaptable to each learner, for each learner, and by each learner.

CHAPTER 17: Limitations and Recommendations

17.1 Introduction

The output of this research offers a framework of support for vocational paramedics transitioning to postgraduate education using RPL for access. Drawing from the insights gained during this research and after a review of the findings and limitations, recommendations are proposed to enhance academic and social support structures for this population.

17.2 Contributions of This Study

17.2.1 *Empirical contribution*

This study contributes to the broad understanding of vocational paramedics' experiences and challenges transitioning into postgraduate education, a topic that remains underexplored in the South African higher education context. It examines how RPL functions as a bridge, facilitating access to advanced academic programmes like the PGDip EC.¹ By documenting the barriers and enablers RPL candidates face while enrolled in the PGDip EC, the research expands knowledge on the intersection of vocational training and postgraduate academic transitions.

The findings provide insights into RPL candidates' reliance on mentorship-driven models and their challenges with academic writing, digital literacy, and navigating institutional processes. These observations highlight systemic gaps in postgraduate support structures and offer a basis for designing responsive and learner-centred interventions. Although not yet tested, the conceptual framework has the potential to be adapted to support the broader transition of vocational learners, providing a structured and flexible method for addressing the academic and institutional challenges associated with postgraduate education. By focusing on scaffolding through tools, rules, and community, the framework can offer guidance for paramedics and other vocational learners navigating similar transitions.

17.2.2 Theoretical contribution

Theoretically, this research applied the SCT to understand the role of scaffolding, MKOs, and the ZPD in supporting learners' transitions from vocational to academic environments.^{2,30} By contextualising these theoretical constructs within postgraduate education, the study extends Vygotsky's principles, traditionally associated with early education, to adult learning and vocational contexts.

The study also contributes to educational frameworks through the developed Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework. This model synthesises Vygotsky's concepts of tools, rules, and community to address the needs of vocational learners entering higher education. The framework's adaptability demonstrates how scaffolding can evolve with learners, addressing immediate academic challenges while fostering long-term autonomy and self-directed learning.^{9,192}

Additionally, the research provides insights into the dynamics of online learning for postgraduate vocational learners, reinterpreting Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction and cultural mediation. By examining online environments' limitations in replicating communal learning spaces, the study offers a perspective on how theoretical concepts like the ZPD can be adapted to digital education settings.

17.2.3 Methodological contribution

This study contributes methodologically by integrating multiple qualitative and participatory approaches to explore vocational paramedics' lived experiences transitioning into postgraduate education. It combined descriptive analysis, thematic analysis, content analysis and PAR to explore RPL candidates' navigation of academic and institutional challenges. While the application of PAR is relatively uncommon in emergency medical care research, it has demonstrated its value in this context by actively involving participants in co-creating practical solutions, such as the Tutor Student Charter and the structured tutor programme. This participatory approach ensured that the findings reflected learners' experiences and led to actionable and context-specific interventions.

The incorporation of PAR into this research highlights its value as an adaptive methodology capable of addressing the needs of RPL candidates while ensuring

actionable outcomes. By triangulating data from interviews, questionnaires, and participatory processes, the study adopted a comprehensive approach to understanding vocational paramedics' experiences. Furthermore, the Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework, developed through this participatory methodology, serves as a practical tool for future research and practice in supporting vocational learners.

17.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. The research scope was broad, and while the richness of the data provided valuable insights, not all aspects could be fully explored within the constraints of this study. Certain themes and findings, though compelling, were beyond the capacity of this project to investigate comprehensively. Additionally, the research focused on a single academic programme, specifically the PGDip EC programme, and its engagement with vocational paramedics who obtained entry via RPL at a particular point in time. While the detailed insights gathered from this cohort are valuable, they may not comprehensively represent the experiences and challenges vocational learners face across other disciplines or sectors. This specificity grounds the findings in the context of EMS and may not fully account for variations in vocational training models or academic transition experiences in different fields.

A further limitation is that some datasets included both RPL and non-RPL learners, which may have shaped the findings. While the analysis sought to highlight the perspectives of RPL candidates, overlaps between the groups mean that not all results can be attributed exclusively to RPL learners.

While PAR was a methodological strength, its use also posed challenges. PAR is inherently time-intensive, and the iterative process of co-creating solutions limited the number of cycles that could be completed within the study's timeline. Additional cycles could have facilitated further development and refinement of solutions, such as the Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework, allowing for more detailed testing and adaptation.

Moreover, the findings are grounded in the context of EMS and may not fully account for variations in vocational training models or academic transition experiences in different fields. Additionally, recognising the collaborative nature of PAR, this research may have benefited from PGDip learners' greater involvement in the cycles. However, learners are considered a vulnerable population, and this is especially true for RPL candidates. Ethically, their inclusion was avoided to protect them from potential harm, such as disruptions to their academic commitments or undue stress during their studies.

Finally, the study focused on academic and institutional barriers while excluding demographic and sociological variables such as race, gender, and socioeconomic background. These factors may influence RPL candidates' experiences and their transitions to postgraduate education. Future research could explore these dimensions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and enablers affecting these transitions.

While the identified limitations highlight areas for future research, they do not diminish the study's contributions to the understanding of vocational learners' transitions to higher education and the development of supportive frameworks to promote their academic and professional success.

17.4 Future Research Opportunities

This research explored the support needs and challenges among vocationally trained paramedics transitioning into postgraduate studies through RPL within UCT's Division of Emergency Medicine PGDip EC programme. While focused on this specific context, the developed principles have the potential to enhance support systems across a range of educational settings, creating scalable frameworks that benefit diverse learner populations.

Expanding the scope to include other vocational fields would be highly beneficial. Although this study centred on paramedics in the EMS sector, similar support needs and barriers likely impact various vocational disciplines. Investigating whether the identified enablers, challenges, and requirements are consistent across different fields

could yield deeper insights into vocational learners' experiences entering higher education. A comparative approach would enrich available knowledge of the contextual factors influencing these transitions and help design better support mechanisms to address shared challenges.

Moreover, a focused analysis of the SCAFFOLD framework's individual components is needed. Evaluating each element separately could reveal which interventions have the most impact and the reasons behind their effectiveness. This understanding could enable institutions to prioritise resources more strategically, investing in support mechanisms that deliver the best academic and practical outcomes for vocational learners.

17.5 Recommendations

17.5.1 Enhancing support systems for vocational learners

Vocational learners transitioning to postgraduate education often bypass undergraduate experiences that provide foundational exposure to university systems. To bridge this gap and provide additional assistance, institutions could revise their orientation programmes and strategies to better promote university support centres, improving the accessibility and personalisation of services for this learner cohort. Furthermore, universities should ensure that these services are effectively and consistently communicated to learners, reinforcing their availability and encouraging utilisation throughout the academic journey.

17.5.2 Implementing the Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework

The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework developed in this study should be piloted and refined to support vocational learners' progression. Scaffolding should evolve as learners develop autonomy, offering structured guidance initially and transitioning to tools that foster independent learning. Further testing this framework across disciplines can ensure its adaptability and effectiveness among diverse learner populations.

17.5.3 Expanding the role of MKOs

The findings highlighted the value of MKOs, such as tutors or mentors, in providing essential guidance and support for vocational learners transitioning to postgraduate education. The PGDip EC programme could enhance this support by formalising MKOs' roles through structured mentorship initiatives. The Tutor Student Charter offers a valuable framework for establishing clear boundaries with vocational learners and should be annually adapted by the tutor team.

17.5.4 Feedback from RPL processes

Institutions should establish a dedicated staff member or an RPL support centre to oversee candidates' application and portfolio review process, providing a centralised system to streamline procedures, offer clear guidance, and ensure timely feedback to applicants. Constructive feedback to unsuccessful RPL applicants is particularly important, as it can help them improve their submissions for reapplication, reduce applicant loss, and promote inclusivity. However, while the RPL process is highly beneficial, it adds to the overall workload for the staff involved. To address this challenge, institutions should anticipate and plan for these demands by allocating appropriate resources and personnel, ensuring a smoother and more efficient process.

CHAPTER 18: Conclusion

18.1 Conclusion

For many learners, pursuing higher education is not just a pathway to professional development but a deeply held aspiration – a dream that promises personal growth, improved opportunities, and the fulfilment of long-held ambitions. Yet, the transition from vocational training to the academic rigours of postgraduate study can be daunting, marked by numerous challenges that require support mechanisms.

This research highlighted RPL's role as a transformative mechanism providing access to higher education. By focusing on the experiences of vocational paramedics transitioning into postgraduate studies, the study emphasised the importance of addressing barriers and enablers to academic success. The Bridge-Scaffold Support Framework, developed through this research, offers a conceptual model to support vocational learners, bridging gaps between vocational expertise and academic demands.

In contributing to the broader discourse on vocational learning and adult education, this study reinforced RPL's potential to create equitable pathways into higher education. However, the findings also highlighted that such transitions are complex and require more than institutional access; they demand systemic approaches that prioritise learner-centred support and collaborative practices.

As Malcolm X aptly stated: “Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today”.¹⁹³ This sentiment emphasises the urgency of reimagining higher education as an inclusive space that values diverse learning journeys. By fostering access and success for vocational learners, institutions invest in individuals' potential and contribute to a more equitable and empowered society. This work is a call to action for institutions, policymakers, and educators to ensure that education becomes a reality for all, transcending barriers and transforming dreams into attainable achievements.

REFERENCES

1. Groome D, Cunningham C. From Vocational to Graduation: A Mixed Methods Study of Support Needs for Vocational Learners Pursuing Post-Graduate Education in South Africa. *African Journal of Emergency Medicine*. 2024;14(4):263-267. doi:10.1016/J.AFJEM.2024.08.008
2. Vygotsky LS. *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press; 1978. doi:10.2307/J.CTVJF9VZ4
3. Department of Health. *National Health Act 2003 (Act No. 61 of 2003) Regulations Relating to Standards For Emergency Medical Services.*; 2021. www.gpwnline.co.za
4. Department of Health. *National Emergency Care Education and Training Policy.*; 2017. <http://www.health.gov.za/index.php/2014-08-15-12-53-24/category/327-2017po?download=2126:national-emergency-care-education-and-training-policy>
5. Mertler C. *The Wiley Handbook of Action Research in Education*. First Edition. (Mertler C, ed.). Wiley-Blackwell; 2019. https://books.google.co.za/books?hl=en&lr=&id=3AuIDwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP9&dq=craig+mertler+action+research&ots=uujl8tNymE&sig=DtJksJN7hohRJ7_Dw96HrYC9z7o
6. HPCSA. Professional Boards - HPCSA. <https://www.hpcsa.co.za/?contentId=0&menuSubId=45&actionName=Professional%20Boards>
7. Republic of South Africa. *National Qualifications Framework Act 67 of 2008*.
8. South Africa Qualifications Authority. *Standard Glossary of Terms.*; 2018. Accessed May 9, 2024. www.saqqa.org.za
9. Division of Emergency Medicine. *Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care - Program Outline 2021.*; 2021. Accessed May 13, 2022. <https://health.uct.ac.za/emergency-medicine/postgraduate-programmes/postgraduate-diploma-emergency-care>
10. National Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning.
11. Wood D, Bruner JS, Ross G. The Role Of Tutoring In Problem Solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. 1976;17(2):89-100. doi:10.1111/J.1469-7610.1976.TB00381.X

12. McGrath S, Ramsarup P, Zeelen J, et al. Vocational Education and Training for African Development: a Literature Review. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*. 2020;72(4):465-487. doi:10.1080/13636820.2019.1679969
13. Sobuwa S, Christopher LD. Emergency Care Education in South Africa: Past, Present and Future. *Australasian Journal of Paramedicine*. 2019;16:1-5. doi:10.33151/ajp.16.647
14. Council on Higher Education. *The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework*; 2013.
15. O'donnell VL, Kean M, Stevens G. Student transition in higher education Concepts, theories and practices.
16. Chiramba O, Ndofirepi ES. Access and Success in Higher Education: Disadvantaged Students' Lived Experiences Beyond Funding Hurdles at a Metropolitan South African university. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. 2023;37(6):56-75. doi:10.20853/37-6-6021
17. Katartzi E, Hayward G. Transitions to Higher Education: the Case of Students with Vocational Background. *Studies in Higher Education*. 2020;45(12):2371-2381. doi:10.1080/03075079.2019.1610866
18. York TT, Gibson C, Rankin S. Defining and Measuring Academic Success. *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation*, 20(5). 2015;20(5).
19. Jooste K, Jasper M. A Framework for Recognition of Prior Learning within a Postgraduate Diploma of Nursing Management in South Africa. *Journal for Nursing Management*. 2010;18(6):704-714. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2834.2010.01160.x
20. Snyman M. The Influence of the Learner Profile on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Assessment. *CiteSeer*. Published online 2013:1-293. <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/13006>
21. Dykes GZ. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Support: Are the Learning Needs of RPL First-Year Students different? *Soc Work*. 2009;45(3). doi:10.15270/45-3-207
22. Needham S. Student Support Structures for Transitioning from Vocational to University Education: A South African Case Study. *Handbook of Vocational Education and Training*. Published online 2019:1581-1592. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-94532-3_92
23. Hoffman JC, Julie H. The Academic Transitional Experiences of Masters' Students at the University of the Western Cape. *Curationis*. 2012;35(1):33. doi:10.4102/CURATIONIS.V35I1.33

24. Brenner A, Goodman S, Meadows A, Cooper L. From prior learning assessment to specialised pedagogy: facilitating student transition through RPL assessment and selection. *Studies in Continuing Education*. 2022;44(3):425-440. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2021.1874333
25. Yadav S, Kalra R, Naeem R, et al. Honey-Mumford's learning styles of medical laboratory students: An observational study with implications for laboratory efficiency. *Archives of Medicine and Health Sciences*. 2020;8(1):107. doi:10.4103/AMHS.AMHS_43_20
26. Swailes S, Senior B. The Dimensionality of Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles Questionnaire. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*. 1999;7(1):1-11. doi:10.1111/1468-2389.00099
27. Journal BI. Determining the Learning Styles of Management Students in India Using Honey & Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire. Accessed December 10, 2024. https://www.academia.edu/12158950/Determining_the_Learning_Styles_of_Management_Students_in_India_Using_Honey_and_Mumford_Learning_Style_Questionnaire
28. Honey Peter, Mumford Alan. *The Manual of Learning Styles*. 2nd ed. Peter Honey; 1986.
29. Walker BW. Setting boundaries between you and learners – The support side of the teacher's role. 2016. Accessed August 9, 2022. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/setting-boundaries-between-you-learners-support-side-teachers-walker>
30. Chaiklin S. The Zone of Proximal Development in Vygotsky's Analysis of Learning and Instruction. *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context*. Published online January 1, 2003:39-64. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511840975.004
31. Shabani K, Khatib M, Ebadi S. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development: Instructional Implications and Teachers' Professional Development. *English Language Teaching*. 2010;3(4). doi:10.5539/elt.v3n4p237
32. Health Professions Council of South Africa. Personnel Curriculum for the Basic Ambulance Assistant Course. Preprint posted online 1998.
33. HPCSA Professional Board of Emergency Care. *Emergency Care Capabilities and Medications*.; 2021.
34. Health Professions Council of South Africa. Closure of certain registers for EMS - HPCSA | HPCSA E-Bulletin.

35. Health Professions Council of South Africa. Personnel Curriculum for the Ambulance Emergency Course. Preprint posted online 1998.
36. Health Professions Council of South Africa. Personnel Curriculum for the Critical Care Assistant. 1998;(October).
37. Health Professions Council of South Africa. Health Professions Act 56 Of 1974 Regulations Relating to Names That May Not Be Used in Relation to the Profession of Emergency Care.
38. Health Professions Council of Emergency Care Professional Board of Emergency Care. *Emergency Care Assistant Curriculum.*; 2016. Accessed September 16, 2021. <http://www.hpcsa.co.za/PBEmergencyCare/Education>
39. McGrath S, Powell L. Skills for sustainable development: Transforming vocational education and training beyond 2015. *Int J Educ Dev.* 2016;50:12-19. doi:10.1016/j.ijedudev.2016.05.006
40. Hamer J. An ontology of RPL: Improving non-traditional learners' access to the recognition of prior learning through a philosophy of recognition. *Studies in Continuing Education.* 2012;34(2):113-127. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2011.613376
41. Harris J. The recognition of prior learning (RPL): introducing a conceptual framework. *South African Journal of Higher Education.* 1999;13(2):38-43.
42. Luckan Y. *The Recognition of Prior Learning in Post-Apartheid South Africa.* Routledge; 2021. doi:10.4324/9781003121428
43. Alexander G, Wyk MM van, Bereng T, November I. The Legitimation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) As Redress Mechanism for Work Spaces in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Narrative of a Black Master Builder. *Journal of Social Sciences.* 2011;26(2):153-162. doi:10.1080/09718923.2011.11892892
44. ENGINEERING COUNCIL OF SOUTH AFRICA. *Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL Policy).*; 2017.
45. South African Board for People Practices. *Recognition of Prior Learning Policy and Procedure.*; 2021.
46. South African Nursing Council. *Guide for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning by Nursing Education Institutes.*; 2009. Accessed December 29, 2024. <https://www.sanc.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SANC-Guide-RPL.pdf>
47. Maclean R. UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Bonn, Germany. Published online 2007.

48. Bohlinger S. Recognition of Prior Learning Across Countries. In: *Technical and Vocational Education and Training*. Vol 23. Springer, Cham; 2017:589-606. doi:10.1007/978-3-319-41713-4_27
49. South African Qualifications Authority. SAQA Bulletin: Volume 19 Number 1: March 2020 - SAQA. Accessed November 29, 2024. https://www.saqa.org.za/saqa-bulletin-volume-19-number-1-march-2020/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
50. Knowles M. *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*. CAMBRIDGE Adult Education; 1980. Accessed August 20, 2023. <https://www.sciepub.com/reference/131641>
51. Council of Higher Education. Policies on the Recognition of Prior Learning , Credit Accumulation and Transfer , and Assessment in higher education. *Council on Higher Education*. 2016;(August).
52. Vocational Training Institute. Vocational Vs. Academic Education: a Comparative Analysis. 2024. Accessed November 3, 2024. <https://instituteofvocationaltraining.com/vocational-vs-academic-education-a-comparative-analysis>
53. Ahmad ST, Watrianthos R, Samala AD, Muskhir M, Dogara G. Project-based Learning in Vocational Education: A Bibliometric Approach. *International Journal of Modern Education and Computer Science*. 2023;15(4):43-56. doi:10.5815/IJMECS.2023.04.04
54. Akoojee S, Gewer A, Mcgrath S. *Vocational Education and Training in Southern Africa A Comparative Study*. (Research Programme on Human Resources Development, ed.). Human Sciences Research Council Published by HSRC Press Private Bag X9182; 2005. www.hsrcpress.ac.za/www.ipgbook.com
55. Brenner A. *Exploring the Transition: A Case Study of RPL Students in a Postgraduate Programme*. University of Cape Town; 2018.
56. Bacha NN. Developing Learners' Academic Writing Skills in Higher Education: A Study for Educational Reform. *Language and Education*. 2002;16(3):161-177. doi:10.1080/09500780208666826
57. Williams B, Boyle M, Molloy A, et al. Undergraduate Paramedic Students' Attitudes to E-learning: Findings from Five University Programs. *Research in Learning Technology*. 2011;19(2). doi:10.3402/RLT.V19I2.10311
58. Donoghue J, Pelletier D, Adams A, Duffield C. Recognition of Prior Learning as University Entry Criteria is Successful in Postgraduate Nursing Students. *Innovations*

- in Education and Teaching International*. 2002;39(1):54-62. doi:10.1080/13558000110102896
59. Sikongo L, Ashipala DO, Pretorius L. Experiences of Postgraduate Nursing Students at the University of Namibia. *African Journal of Nursing and Midwifery*. 2020;22(1). doi:10.25159/2520-5293/6622
 60. Tiwari R, Naidoo R, English R, Chikte U. Estimating the Emergency Care Workforce in South Africa. *Afr J Prim Health Care Fam Med*. 2021;13(1). doi:10.4102/PHCFM.V13I1.3174
 61. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics. May 2023. Accessed July 28, 2024. <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes292043>
 62. Australian Government Productivity Commission. Report on Government Services 2024. Published online 2023. doi:10.1/JQUERY.HOVERINTENT.MIN.JS
 63. Govender I. Brain drain in South Africa is Affecting Health Care. *South African Family Practice*. 2024;66(1):5830. doi:10.4102/SAFP.V66I1.5830
 64. Govender S, Khaliq OP, Naidoo R, Moodley J. The current state of emergency medical services in South Africa: A review. *S Afr J Sci*. 2024;120(7/8). doi:10.17159/sajs.2024/16138
 65. Govender K, Grainger L, Naidoo R, MacDonald R. The pending Loss of Advanced Life Support Paramedics in South Africa. *African Journal of Emergency Medicine*. 2012;2(2):59-66. doi:10.1016/J.AFJEM.2011.11.001
 66. University of Cape Town. Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care | Division of Emergency Medicine. Accessed November 8, 2024. <https://health.uct.ac.za/emergency-medicine/postgraduate-programmes/postgraduate-diploma-emergency-care>
 67. Jaffer T, Butler L, Sirkhotte W. Experience of Developing an Online Postgraduate Diploma. In: *APEREO Conference*. 2024.
 68. Floor N. Empathy Map for Learners - Learning Experience Design. October 2020. Accessed April 28, 2024. <https://lxd.org/news/empathy-map-for-learners-and-learning-experience-design/>
 69. Harden RM. AMEE Guide No. 21: Curriculum Mapping: a Tool for Transparent and Authentic Teaching and Learning. *Med Teach*. 2001;23(2):123-137. doi:10.1080/01421590120036547
 70. Young C, Perović N. Rapid and Creative Course Design: As Easy as ABC? *Procedia Soc Behav Sci*. 2016;228:390-395. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.07.058

71. Lilley M, Pyper A, Attwood S. Understanding the Student Experience through the Use of Personas. *Innovation in Teaching and Learning in Information and Computer Sciences*. 2012;11(1):4-13. doi:10.11120/ital.2012.11010004
72. Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching. CILT Home | Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching. 2024. Accessed September 2, 2024. <https://cilt.uct.ac.za/>
73. University of Cape Town. *Policy on Recognition of Prior Learning*.; 2016. Accessed December 29, 2024. https://ched.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/content_migration/ched_uct_ac_za/61/files/Policy_Recognition_Prior_Learning_2016-08.pdf
74. Grant MJ. *Institutional Barriers to Learning : A Case Study of a University in KwaZulu Natal*. University of Kwa Zulu Natal; 2015.
75. University of Cape Town. Support Services. 2024. Accessed March 16, 2024. <https://uct.ac.za/campus-life/support-and-services>
76. Asamoah MK. Learner Support Services for Postgraduate Students: A Qualitative Approach. *E-Learning and Digital Media*. 2019;16(5):367-392. doi:10.1177/2042753019860613
77. University of Cape Town. Postgraduate and postdoctoral resources | Applicants & Students. 2024. Accessed August 22, 2024. <https://www.students.uct.ac.za/students/current-students-online-resources/postgraduate-and-postdoctoral-resources>
78. University of Cape Town. Undergraduate resources | Applicants & Students. 2024. Accessed August 22, 2024. <https://www.students.uct.ac.za/students/current-students-online-resources-undergraduate/undergraduate-resources>
79. Poobalan A, Barrow J, Cleland J. "I had no idea the university offered"...: The support needs of postgraduate taught students. *MedEdPublish*. 2021;10(1). doi:10.15694/MEP.2021.000121.1
80. Lekhetho M. Postgraduate Students' Perceptions of Support Services Rendered by a Distance Learning Institution. *International Journal of Higher Education*. 2022;11(7):24-36.
81. Abiddin NZ, Ismail A. Exploring service and support needs in postgraduate education towards the higher education quality. *Asian Soc Sci*. 2014;10(17):52-56. doi:10.5539/ass.v10n17p52
82. University of Cape Town. Student Support Services. 2024. Accessed August 22, 2024. <https://vula.uct.ac.za/access/content/public/gateway/student-support.html>

83. University of Cape Town. Orientation | Faculty of Health Sciences. 24AD. Accessed September 22, 2024. <https://health.uct.ac.za/orientation>
84. Andersson P, Fejes A, Sandberg F. Introducing research on recognition of prior learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. 2013;32(4):405-411. doi:10.1080/02601370.2013.778069
85. Kolb DA. Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development. *J Organ Behav*. 1984;8(4):359-360. Accessed April 14, 2024. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235701029_Experiential_Learning_Experience_As_The_Source_Of_Learning_And_Development
86. Illeris K. *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists ... in Their Own Words*. 1st ed. Taylor & Francis; 2009.
87. Skinner B. About behaviorism. 1974. Accessed July 16, 2024. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1975-00035-000>
88. McLeod S. Jerome Bruner Theory of Cognitive Development & Constructivism. 2024. Accessed August 13, 2024. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/bruner.html>
89. Lave J, Wenger E. Situated Learning. *Situated Learning*. Published online September 27, 1991. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511815355
90. Bernstein B. *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity Theory, Research, Critique*. Revised. Oxford Rowman & Littlefield; 2000. Accessed August 20, 2025. <https://www.scirp.org/reference/referencespapers?referenceid=2801095>
91. Shah TA, Rashid S. Applying Vygotsky to Adult Learning. *Journal of Social Sciences, Government College University Faisalabad*. 2017;8(1).
92. K12 Academics. Theory of Instructional Scaffolding. 2023. Accessed August 13, 2024. <https://www.k12academics.com/Educational%20Practices/instructional-scaffolding>
93. Taber KS. *Scaffolding Learning: Principles for Effective Teaching*. 1st ed. (Abend M, ed.). Nova Science Publishers; 2018. Accessed December 28, 2024. <https://science-education-research.com/publications/chapters/scaffolding-learning/>
94. Storm A. Social Constructivist Theory: Understanding Vygotsky's Social Constructivism in Education. 2024. Accessed October 19, 2024. <https://www.thinkific.com/blog/social-constructivist-theory/>
95. Langemeyer I. Beyond the concept of "Gestalten" – Kurt Lewin and Lev Semënovic Vygotsky as methodologically related. *Gestalt Theory*. 2023;45(3):287-300. doi:10.2478/GTH-2023-0021

96. Puntambekar S, Hübscher R. Tools for scaffolding students in a complex learning environment: What have we gained and what have we missed? *Educ Psychol.* 2005;40(1):1-12. doi:10.1207/S15326985EP4001_1
97. Eun B. The zone of proximal development as an overarching concept: A framework for synthesizing Vygotsky's theories. *Educational Philosophy and Theory.* 2019;51(1):18-30. doi:10.1080/00131857.2017.1421941
98. Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford English Dictionary Online. *Oxford English Dictionary.* Preprint posted online 2023:<http://dictionary.oed.com/>. Accessed May 12, 2023. <http://dictionary.oed.com>
99. Cermak R. *An Investigation Into Recognition of Prior Learning Within The National Certificate: Emergency Care Programme in the Western Cape.* 2016.
100. Miguel MC, Ornelas JH, Maroco JP. Recognition of prior learning: the participants' perspective. *Studies in Continuing Education.* 2016;38(2):179-194. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2015.1061491
101. Snyman M, van den Berg G. The Significance of the Learner Profile in Recognition of Prior Learning. *Adult Education Quarterly.* 2018;68(1):24-40. doi:10.1177/0741713617731809
102. Fox T. Adult learning and the recognition of prior learning: the 'white elephant' in Australian universities. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning.* 2005;45(3):352-370.
103. Visser JA. *Challenges and Support Needs of Mature Postgraduate Part-Time Students at a Higher Education Institution.* Stellenbosch University; 2011.
104. Mothokoa NB, Maritz J. Recognition of prior learning candidates' experiences in a nurse training programme. *Health SA Gesondheid.* 2018;23. doi:10.4102/hsag.v23i0.1080
105. Mutanana N, Pedzisi C. An Analysis of Challenges Faced by Part-time Postgraduate Block Release Students at Institutions of Higher Learning. *The International Journal of Humanities & Social Studies.* 2020;8(7). doi:10.24940/theijhss/2020/v8/i7/hs1801-012
106. Walters S, Koetsier J. Working adults learning in South African higher education. *Perspectives in Education.* 2006;24(3):97-108. Accessed January 21, 2022. <https://www.bing.com/search?q=Working+Adults+Learning+in+South+African+Higher+Education.&cvid=e18cd26fdc574c168d335a2e6acb3edf&aqs=edge..69i57j69i60.2174j0j4&FORM=ANAB01&DAF0=1&PC=U531>

107. Singh M. Let the Doors of Learning Be Open to All--A Case for Recognition of Prior Learning. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. 2011;25(4):803-818.
108. Sosibo L. Key factors contributing to postgraduate students' success: Making a case for Coronavirus-19 and beyond. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. 2024;38(1):62-81. doi:10.20853/38-1-6263
109. Lowe T. What is the Meaning of Student Success in higher Education? *Buckingham Journal of Education*. 2023;4(2):91-102.
110. South African Qualifications Authority. *Current Recognition of Prior Learning Initiatives in South Africa.*; 2014.
111. Lincoln YS, Guba EG. *Naturalistic Inquiry*. SAGE Publications; 1985. https://books.google.co.za/books?hl=en&lr=&id=2oA9aWINeooC&oi=fnd&pg=PA7&ots=0vmxSbSevk&sig=pEVzEta2GPrOHG1BoVAAeCvb8YE&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false
112. Shenton AK. *Strategies for Ensuring Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research Projects*. Vol 22. IOS Press; 2004.
113. Patton MQ. Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Serv Res*. Published online 1999.
114. Guba E. Criteria For Assessing The Trustworthiness Of Naturalistic Inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology*. 1981;29(2):75-91. Accessed December 28, 2024. <https://idoc.pub/documents/guba-e-1981-criteria-for-assessing-the-trustworthiness-of-naturalistic-inquiries-d4pqzwxw39np>
115. McLeod S. Transferability In Qualitative Research. 2024. Accessed November 16, 2023. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/transferability-in-qualitative-research.html>
116. Peddle M. Maintaining reflexivity in qualitative nursing research. *Nurs Open*. 2022;9(6):2908-2914. doi:10.1002/nop2.999
117. Olmos-Vega FM, Stalmeijer RE, Varpio L, Kahlke R. A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE Guide No. 149. *Med Teach*. 2023;45(3):241-251. doi:10.1080/0142159X.2022.2057287
118. Berger R. Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*. 2015;15(2):219-234. doi:10.1177/1468794112468475
119. Kolb AY, Kolb DA. Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*. 2005;4(2):193-212. doi:10.5465/AMLE.2005.17268566

120. Honey Peter, Mumford A. The learning styles questionnaire : 80-item version. Published online 2006.
121. Emmanuel ENM, Chaseling M, Boyd B. Nurturing academic writing for students in an enrolled to registered nurse conversion course at university. *J Nurs Educ Pract*. 2019;9(8):121. doi:10.5430/JNEP.V9N8P121
122. BusinessBalls. Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles - BusinessBalls. <https://www.businessballs.com/self-awareness/honey-and-mumfords-learning-styles/>
123. Lang M. Learning Styles and On-Line Learning Analytics: An Analysis of Student Behaviour Based on the Honey and Mumford Model. *Lecture Notes in Computer Science (including subseries Lecture Notes in Artificial Intelligence and Lecture Notes in Bioinformatics)*. 2023;14060 LNCS:154-166. doi:10.1007/978-3-031-48060-7_12
124. Pashler H, McDaniel M, Rohrer D, Bjork R. Learning styles concepts and evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, Supplement*. 2008;9(3):105-119. doi:10.1111/J.1539-6053.2009.01038.X
125. Cockerton T. Factorial Validity and Internal Reliability of Honey and Mumford's Learning Styles Questionnaire. *Psychol Rep*. 2002;91(6):503. doi:10.2466/pr0.91.6.503-519
126. Sadler-Smith E. The relationship between learning style and cognitive style. *Pers Individ Dif*. 2001;30(4):609-616. doi:10.1016/S0191-8869(00)00059-3
127. Maric M, Penger S, Todorovic I, Djurica N, Pintar R. Differences in Learning Styles: A comparison of Slovenian Universities. *Procedia Soc Behav Sci*. 2015;197:175-183. doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.07.079
128. Fleming ND, Mills C. Not Another Inventory, Rather a Catalyst for Reflection. *A Journal of Educational Development*. Published online 1992:246. Accessed June 21, 2023. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad>
129. Shukr I, Zainab R, Rana M. Learning Styles of Postgraduate and Undergraduate Medical Students. *Journal of the College of Physicians and Surgeons*. 2103;23(1):25-30.
130. Araiza I. Ethical Issues Working with Vulnerable Populations. In: Leavy P, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Methods for Public Scholarship*. Oxford University Press; 2019:75-101. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274481.013.1
131. Mupinga DM, Nora RT, Yaw DC. The Learning Styles, Expectations, and Needs of Online Students. *College Teaching*. 2006;54(1):185-189. doi:10.3200/CTCH.54.1.185-189

132. Williams B, Brown T, Winship C. Learning style preferences of undergraduate paramedic students: A pilot study. *J Nurs Educ Pract.* 2013;3(1). doi:10.5430/jnep.v3n1p51
133. Winstanley D, Cunningham C. A Descriptive Literature Review of Recognition of Prior Learning for Vocational Learners in Emergency Medical Care in South Africa. *South African Journal of Higher Education.* Published online 2023. doi:10.20853/37-4-5313
134. Ahmed SK. The pillars of trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health.* 2024;2:100051. doi:10.1016/j.glmedi.2024.100051
135. Byrne D. A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Qual Quant.* 2022;56(3):1391-1412. doi:10.1007/S11135-021-01182-Y
136. Guion LA. Triangulation: Establishing the Validity of Qualitative Studies. Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences: University of Florida. Published online 2002:1-3. <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>
137. Kelle U, Kühberger C, Bernhard R. How to use mixed-methods and triangulation designs: An introduction to history education research. *History Education Research Journal.* 2019;16(1):5-23. doi:10.18546/herj.16.1.02
138. International Labour Office. *World Employment and Social Outlook.;* 2024. doi:10.54394/HQAE1085
139. Evitts R. *The Barriers of Non-Traditional Students in Higher Education.* 2022.
140. Namakula H, Ndaba M. Leaving no one behind: Leveraging support to promote access with success in post-graduate studies. *South African Journal of Higher Education.* 2024;38(1):28-41. doi:10.20853/38-1-6248
141. Tong A, Sainsbury P, Craig J. Consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ): a 32-item checklist for interviews and focus groups. *International Journal for Quality in Health Care.* 2007;19(6):349-357. doi:10.1093/INTQHC/MZM042
142. Otter.ai - AI Meeting Note Taker & Real-time AI Transcription. <https://otter.ai/>
143. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual Res Psychol.* 2006;3(2):77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
144. Department of Higher Education and Training. *National Academic Support Guidelines for Technical and Vocational Education and Training Colleges.;* 2021.
145. Chevalier JM, Buckles DJ. Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry. *Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry.* Published online January 1, 2019:1-434. doi:10.4324/9781351033268

146. Kemmis S, McTaggart R, Nixon R. *The Action Research Planner: Doing Critical Participatory Action Research*. Springer Singapore; 2014. doi:10.1007/978-981-4560-67-2
147. Lewin K. Action Research and Minority Problems. *Journal of Social Issues*. 1946;2(4):34-46. doi:10.1111/J.1540-4560.1946.TB02295.X
148. Adelman C. Kurt Lewin and the Origins of Action Research. *Educ Action Res*. 1(1):7-24. doi:10.1080/0965079930010102
149. Harrington K, Phelps-Ward R. The Action Research Collective: Using Participatory Action Research to Support Graduate Student Development. *J Coll Stud Dev*. 2021;62(6):736-740. doi:10.1353/csd.2021.0070
150. Selener D. Participatory action research and social change. *The Cornell Participatory Action Research Network*. 1997;12(6):655-658.
151. Cook-Sather A. Student voice across contexts: Fostering student agency in today's schools. *Theory Pract*. 2020;59(2):182-191. doi:10.1080/00405841.2019.1705091
152. Lloyd-Evans S, Oenga E, Zischka L, et al. Participatory Action Research: A Toolkit. Published online 2023. Accessed March 2, 2024. <https://research.reading.ac.uk/community-based-research/wp-content/uploads/sites/114/2023/06/PAR-Toolkit-v10.pdf>
153. Baum F, MacDougall C, Smith D, Baum PF. Participatory Action Research. *J Epidemiol Community Health*. 2006;60:854-857. doi:10.1136/jech.2004.028662
154. Danley KS, Ellison ML. A Handbook for Participatory Action Researchers. *Psychiatry*. Published online 1999:33. https://escholarship.umassmed.edu/psych_cmhsr://escholarship.umassmed.edu/psych_cmhsr/470
155. Mertler CA. Classroom-based action research: revisiting the process as customizable and meaningful professional development for educators. Published online 2013. Accessed January 8, 2025. <https://uobrep.openrepository.com/handle/10547/335968>
156. Mertler CA. Overview of the Action Research Process. In: *Action Research: Improving Schools and Empowering Educators*. 2017:34-50. doi:10.4135/9781483396484.n2
157. Mertler CA, Charles CM. *Introduction to Educational Research*. Pearson/Allyn & Bacon; 2005.
158. Mertler C. *Action Research: Teachers as Researchers in the Classroom.*; 2009. Accessed February 27, 2022. <https://books.google.co.za/books?hl=en&lr=&id=nVGyeyEzjFUC&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&d>

q=craig+mertler+action+research&ots=NyvW8oeF1j&sig=hlJalfem4imqahaaeke3CS
myypY

159. Mertler CA. *Action Research Communities*. Routledge; 2017. doi:10.4324/9781315164564
160. Herr Kathryn, Anderson GL. The action research dissertation : a guide for students and faculty. Published online 2015:189.
161. Groundwater-Smith S, Mockler N. Ethics in practitioner research: an issue of quality. *Res Pap Educ*. 2007;22(2):199-211. doi:10.1080/02671520701296171
162. Reason P, Bradbury H. The SAGE Handbook of Action Research. *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*. Published online May 18, 2008. doi:10.4135/9781848607934
163. Lambley R. The challenges of navigating participatory research: the perspective of a doctoral student who co-ordinates a team of researchers with lived experience of mental health challenges. *Educ Action Res*. 2025;33(1):143-152. doi:10.1080/09650792.2024.2429444
164. Smith-Carrier T, Van Tuyl R. The Merits and Pitfalls of Participatory Action Research: Navigating Tokenism and Inclusion with Lived Experience Members. <http://journals.openedition.org/irpp>. 2024;6(6:1):46-62. doi:10.4000/11WHJ
165. Butti E. Youth Are Not All the Same: On the Appropriateness and Limits of Participatory Methods in Youth Research. *Social Sciences 2025, Vol 14, Page 83*. 2025;14(2):83. doi:10.3390/SOCSCI14020083
166. Nix E, Paulose J, Shrubsole C, et al. Participatory Action Research as a Framework for Transdisciplinary Collaboration: A Pilot Study on Healthy, Sustainable, Low-Income Housing in Delhi, India. *Global Challenges*. 2019;3(4):1800054. doi:10.1002/GCH2.201800054;WGROU:STRING:PUBLICATION
167. Vaughn LM, Jacquez F. Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process. *J Particip Res Methods*. 2020;1(1):2020. doi:10.35844/001C.13244
168. Halliday AJ, Kern ML, Garrett DK, Turnbull DA. The Student Voice in Well-Being: a Case Study of Participatory Action Research in Positive Education. *Educ Action Res*. 2019;27(2):173-196. doi:10.1080/09650792.2018.1436079
169. Sendall MC, McCosker LK, Brodie A, Hill M, Crane P. Participatory action research, mixed methods, and research teams: Learning from philosophically juxtaposed

- methodologies for optimal research outcomes. *BMC Med Res Methodol.* 2018;18(1). doi:10.1186/s12874-018-0636-1
170. MacDonald C. Understanding Participatory Action Research: A Qualitative Research Methodology Option. *The Canadian Journal of Action Research.* 2012;13(2):34-50. doi:10.33524/CJAR.V13I2.37
 171. Löfman P, Pelkonen M, Pietilä A. Ethical issues in participatory action research. *Scand J Caring Sci.* 2004;18(3):333-340. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6712.2004.00277.x
 172. Khanlou N, Peter E. Participatory Action Research: Considerations for Ethical Review. *Soc Sci Med.* 2005;60(10):2333-2340. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2004.10.004
 173. Rubin R. Will the Real SMART Goals Please Stand Up? *The Industrial-Organizational Psychologist.* 2002;39(4):26-27.
 174. Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching U of CT. Tutor Orientation Site. 2021. Accessed July 12, 2023. <https://vula.uct.ac.za/portal/site/c7315660-71c0-4ca2-b8f7-890468c982c1/tool/f8a056e9-e411-4e22-ba49-45e9c54e82b9>
 175. Krippendorff K. *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology.* SAGE Publications, Inc.; 2019. doi:10.4135/9781071878781
 176. Erlingsson C, Brysiewicz P. A hands-on guide to doing content analysis. *African Journal of Emergency Medicine.African Federation for Emergency Medicine.* 2017;7(3):93-99. doi:10.1016/j.afjem.2017.08.001
 177. Bengtsson M. How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *NursingPlus Open.* 2016;2:8-14. doi:10.1016/j.npls.2016.01.001
 178. Heale R, Forbes D. Understanding triangulation in research. *Evidence Based Nursing.* 2013;16(4):98-98. doi:10.1136/eb-2013-101494
 179. Imperial College London. Setting boundaries. Accessed September 16, 2023. <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/personal-tutors-guide/managing-the-relationship/setting-boundaries>
 180. Division for Academic Planning QP and ASD. *Policy On Tutoring and Tutors.*; 2019. Accessed September 16, 2023. <https://www.intranet.uj.ac.za>
 181. Pather S, Senate B. *Guideline Of The University Of Western Cape On Tutoring And Tutor Practices & Procedures, University of Western Cape.* Accessed September 16, 2023. https://www.uwc.ac.za/files/files/Final-Tutor-Guidelines_Updated-January-2020-1.pdf
 182. Liker KL. *The Toyota Way: 14 Management Principles From the World's Greatest Manufacturer.* 2004. Accessed September 25, 2023.

https://books.google.co.za/books/about/The_Toyota_Way.html?id=eZutzPww02EC&redir_esc=y

183. Microsoft Corporation. Microsoft Forms. *Microsoft Corporation*. Preprint posted online 2024.
184. Nuis W, Segers M, Beusaert S. Conceptualizing mentoring in higher education: A systematic literature review. *Educ Res Rev*. 2023;41:100565. doi:10.1016/J.EDUREV.2023.100565
185. Jacobi M. Mentoring and Undergraduate Academic Success: A Literature Review. *Rev Educ Res*. 1991;61(4):505. doi:10.2307/1170575
186. Microsoft Corporation. Microsoft Excel. *Microsoft Corporation*. Preprint posted online 2024.
187. HPCSA Professional Board of Emergency Care. *Clinical Practice Guidelines*.; 2018. Accessed July 27, 2021. https://www.hpcsa.co.za/Uploads/editor/UserFiles/downloads/emergency_care/CLINICAL_PRACTICE_GUIDELINES_PROTOCOLS_2018.pdf
188. Shumba A, Naong M. The influence of family income on the career choice of students at universities of technology. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. 2016;27(4). doi:10.20853/27-4-277
189. Saidi A. Promoting access to, and success in postgraduate education in South Africa: A synthesis of emerging issues. *South African Journal of Higher Education*. 2024;38(1):1-27. doi:10.20853/38-1-6304
190. Garnett J, Cavaye A. Recognition of prior learning: opportunities and challenges for higher education. *Journal of Work-Applied Management*. 2015;7(1):28-37. doi:10.1108/JWAM-10-2015-001/FULL/PDF
191. Udeagha GM, van der Wath AE, Moagi MM. Experiences of students who gained entry to a nursing college through recognition of prior learning: A phenomenological study. *Nurse Educ Today*. 2022;117. doi:10.1016/j.nedt.2022.105474
192. Lockett K, Lockett T. The development of agency in first generation learners in higher education: a social realist analysis. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 2009;14(5):469-481. doi:10.1080/13562510903186618
193. Malcolm X. Malcolm X's Speech at the Founding Rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity •. 1964. Accessed September 17, 2024. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1964-malcolm-x-s-speech-founding-rally-organization-afro-american-unity>

194. Lindgreen A, Di Benedetto CA, Brodie RJ, Jaakkola E. How to develop great conceptual frameworks for business-to-business marketing. *Industrial Marketing Management*. 2021;94:A2-A10. doi:10.1016/J.INDMARMAN.2020.04.005
195. McMeekin N, Wu O, Germini E, Briggs A. How methodological frameworks are being developed: evidence from a scoping review. *BMC Med Res Methodol*. 2020;20(1):173. doi:10.1186/S12874-020-01061-4
196. Jaakkola E. Designing conceptual articles: four approaches. *AMS Review*. 2020;10(1):18-26. doi:10.1007/S13162-020-00161-0
197. Johnson M, Fitzsimons S, Coleman V. Development challenges in challenging contexts: A 3-stage curriculum framework design approach for Education in Emergencies. *Prospects (Paris)*. 2022;53(1-2):43. doi:10.1007/S11125-022-09601-0
198. Luft JA, Jeong S, Idsardi R, Gardner G. Literature Reviews, Theoretical Frameworks, and Conceptual Frameworks: An Introduction for New Biology Education Researchers. *CBE Life Sci Educ*. 2022;21(3):rm33. doi:10.1187/CBE.21-05-0134/ASSET/IMAGES/LARGE/CBE-21-RM33-G001.JPEG
199. The Ottawa Research Institute. PRISMA Diagram Generator. PRISMA Flow Diagram Generator. 2016. Accessed February 26, 2022. <http://prisma.thetacollaborative.ca/>

Appendix 1: Ethical Approval Study 1



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
Faculty of Health Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee



Room 45, E-52- Old Main Building
Grootes Schuur Hospital
Observatory 7925
Telephone [021] 406 6492
Email: hrec-enquiries@uct.ac.za

Website: www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms

19 January 2022

HREC REF:012 /2022

Dr C Cunningham
Division of Emergency Medicine
F-51 OMB
Email: Charmaine.cunningham@uct.ac.za
Student: debbi@storage.co.za

Dear Dr Cunningham

PROJECT TITLE: STUDY 1: A DESCRIPTIVE LITERATURE REVIEW CONCERNING EXISTING GLOBAL AND AFRICAN RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) PROCESSES WITH DETAILS OF THE SUPPORT REQUIREMENTS REQUIRED BY RPL STUDENTS DURING POST GRADUATE STUDIES. (DOCTORAL DEGREE - MS DEBBIE WINSTANLEY)

Thank you for submitting your study to the Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for review.

It is a pleasure to inform you that the HREC has **formally approved** the above-mentioned study.

This approval is subject to strict adherence to the HREC recommendations regarding research involving human participants during COVID -19, dated 17 March 2020: 06 July 2020 & 01 July 2021.

Approval is granted for one year until 30 January 2023.

Please submit a progress form, using the standardised Annual Report Form if the study continues beyond the approval period. Please submit a Standard Closure form if the study is completed within the approval period.
(Forms can be found on our website: www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms)

The HREC acknowledge that the student: Ms Debbie Winstanley will also be involved in this study.

Please quote the HREC REF 012/2022 in all your correspondence.

Please note that the ongoing ethical conduct of the study remains the responsibility of the principal investigator.

Please note that for all studies approved by the HREC, the principal investigator **must** obtain appropriate institutional approval, where necessary, before the research may occur.

Appendix 2: Ethical Approval and Renewal for Study 2



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
Faculty of Health Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee



Room 45 E-52-E-Floor- Old Main Building
Groote Schuur Hospital
Observatory 7925
Telephone [021] 406 6492
Email: hrec-enquiries@uct.ac.za
Website: www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms

24 January 2022

HREC REF: 041/2022

Dr C Cunningham
Division of Emergency Medicine
F-51 OMB
Email: Charmaine.cunningham@uct.ac.za
Student: debbi@storage.co.za

Dear Dr Cunningham

PROJECT TITLE : STUDY TWO: A MIXED METHODOLOGY STUDY TO EXPLORE LEARNING STYLES, PERCEPTION, AND SUPPORT NEEDS OF RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING CANDIDATES DURING THE POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EMERGENCY CARE-DOCTORAL CANDIDATE-MS DEBBIE WINSTANLEY

Thank you for submitting your study to the Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for review.

It is a pleasure to inform you that the HREC has **formally approved** the above-mentioned study, subject to approval from Director of student affairs.

This approval is subject to strict adherence to the HREC recommendations regarding research involving human participants during COVID -19, dated 17 March 2020: 06 July 2020 & 01 July 2021.

Approval is granted for one year until the 30 January 2023.

Please submit a progress form, using the standardised Annual Report Form if the study continues beyond the approval period. Please submit a Standard Closure form if the study is completed within the approval period.
(Forms can be found on our website: www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms)

The HREC acknowledge that the student: Ms Debbie Winstanley will also be involved in this study.

Please quote the HREC REF 041/2022 in all your correspondence.

Please note that the ongoing ethical conduct of the study remains the responsibility of the principal investigator.

Please note that for all studies approved by the HREC, the principal investigator **must** obtain appropriate Institutional approval, where necessary, before the research may occur.



FHS016: Annual Progress Report / Renewal

HREC office use only (FWA00001637; IRB00001938)			
This serves as notification of annual approval, including any documentation described below.			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approved	Annual progress report	Approved until/next renewal date	30/11/2023
<input type="checkbox"/> Not approved	See attached comments		
Signature Chairperson of the HREC/ Designee		Date Signed	19/11/2022

Note: Please email this form and supporting documents (if applicable) in a combined pdf-file to hrec-enquiries@uct.ac.za.
 Please clarify your plan for research-related activities during COVID-19 lockdown.
 Please use the latest form found on our website:
<http://www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms>

Comments to PI from the HREC
Please can we have an extension on HREC041/2022 for 2023. Data collection is done, but analysis is ongoing and we would like to leave the study open in case we need to revisit the earlier phases of the study.

Principal Investigator to complete the following:

1. Protocol information

Date (when submitting this form)	17 November 2022		
HREC REF Number	HREC041/022	Current Ethics Approval was granted until	31 January 2023
Protocol title	Study two: a mixed methodology study to explore learning styles, perception, and support needs of recognition of prior learning candidates during the Post Graduate Diploma in Emergency Care		
Protocol number (if applicable)			
Are there any sub-studies linked to this study?	Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	
If yes, could you please provide the HREC Reference number for all sub-studies? Note: A separate FHS016 must be submitted for each sub-study.			



Appendix 3: Ethical Approval and Renewal for Study 3



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
Faculty of Health Sciences
Human Research Ethics Committee



Room 45 E-52-E-Floor- Old Main Building
Grootes Schuur Hospital
Observatory 7925
Telephone [021] 406 6492
Email: hrec-enquiries@uct.ac.za
Website: www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms

04 March 2022

HREC REF: 042/2022

Dr C Cunningham
Division of Emergency Medicine
F-51 OMB
Email: Charmaine.cunningham@uct.ac.za
Student: debbie@storage.co.za

Dear Dr Cunningham

PROJECT TITLE : STUDY THREE: A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO EVALUATE CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT NEEDS OF THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING CANDIDATES DURING THE POST GRADUATE DIPLOMA IN EMERGENCY CARE-DOCTORAL CANDIDATE-MS DEBBIE WINSTANLEY

Thank you for submitting your study to the Faculty of Health Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for review.

It is a pleasure to inform you that the HREC has **formally approved** the above-mentioned study.

This approval is subject to strict adherence to the HREC recommendations regarding research involving human participants during COVID -19, dated 17 March 2020: 06 July 2020 & 01 July 2021.

Approval is granted for one year until the 30 March 2023.

Please submit a progress form, using the standardised Annual Report Form if the study continues beyond the approval period. Please submit a Standard Closure form if the study is completed within the approval period.
(Forms can be found on our website: www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms)

The HREC acknowledge that the student: Ms Debbie Winstanley will also be involved in this study.


Please quote the HREC REF 042/2022 in all your correspondence.

Please note that the ongoing ethical conduct of the study remains the responsibility of the principal investigator.

Please note that for all studies approved by the HREC, the principal investigator **must** obtain appropriate Institutional approval, where necessary, before the research may occur.



FHS016: Annual Progress Report / Renewal

HREC office use only (FWA00001637; IRB00001938)			
This serves as notification of annual approval, including any documentation described below.			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approved	Annual progress report	Approved until/next renewal date	30/03/2024
<input type="checkbox"/> Not approved	See attached comments		
Signature Chairperson of the HREC/ Designee			Date Signed 27/1/2023

Note: Please email this form and supporting documents (if applicable) in a combined pdf-file to hrec-enquiries@uct.ac.za.
 Please clarify your plan for research-related activities during COVID-19 lockdown.
 Please use the latest form found on our website:
<http://www.health.uct.ac.za/fhs/research/humanethics/forms>

Comments to PI from the HREC
Please can we have an extension on the study, we are still busy with the action learning cycles, and if our current mapping goes according to plan, we will be busy until the end of 2023 with it.

Principal Investigator to complete the following:

1. Protocol information

Date (when submitting this form)	26 January 2023		
HREC REF Number	042/2022	Current Ethics Approval was granted until	30 March 2023
Protocol title	Study three: a participatory action research approach to evaluate challenges and support needs of the recognition of prior learning candidates during the Post Graduate Diploma in Emergency Care		
Protocol number (if applicable)			
Are there any sub-studies linked to this study?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No	
If yes, could you please provide the HREC Reference number for all sub-studies? Note: A separate FHS016 must be submitted for each sub-study.			

Appendix 4: Department of Student Affairs Approval

	RESEARCH ACCESS TO STUDENTS	DSA100
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------	------------------------------------	---------------

NOTES

- This form must be **FULLY** completed by all applicants who want to access UCT students for the purpose of research or surveys.
- Return the fully completed **(a) DSA 100 application form by email, in the same word format, together with your: (b) research proposal inclusive of your survey, (c) copy of your ethics approval letter / proof (d) informed consent letter** to: Nadierah.Pienaar@uct.ac.za. Your application will be attended to by the Executive Director, Department of Student Affairs (DSA), UCT.
- The turnaround time for a reply is **approximately 10 working days**.
- NB: It is the responsibility of the researcher/s to apply for and to obtain **ethics approval and to comply with amendments that may be requested**; as well as to **obtain** approval to access UCT staff and/or UCT students, from the following, at UCT, respectively:
 - Ethics:** Chairperson, Faculty Research Ethics Committee' (FREC) for ethics approval, (b) **Staff access:** Executive Director: HR for approval to access UCT staff, and (c) **Student access:** Executive Director: Student Affairs for approval to access UCT students.
- Note:** UCT Senate Research Protocols requires compliance to the above, **even if prior approval has been obtained from any other institution/agency**. UCT's research protocol requirements applies to **all persons, institutions and agencies** from UCT and external to UCT who want to conduct research on human subjects for academic, marketing or service related reasons at UCT.
- Should approval be granted to access UCT students for this research study, such approval is effective for a period of one year from the date of approval (as stated in Section D of this form), and the approval expires automatically on the last day.
- The approving authority reserves the right to revoke an approval based on reasonable grounds and/or new information.

SECTION A: RESEARCH APPLICANT/S DETAILS

Position	Staff / Student No	Title and Full Name	Contact Details (Email & Cell & Land line)
A.1 Student Number	NTTDEB002	Ms Debbie Winstanley	NTTDEB002@mvuct.ac.za / debbi@storage.co.za / 0824981867
A.2 Academic / PASS Staff No.			
A.3 Visitor/ Researcher ID No.			
A.4 University at which a student or employee	UCT	Address if <u>not</u> UCT:	
A.5 Faculty & Department/School	Department of Family, Community and Emergency Care, Division of Emergency Medicine, Faculty of Health Science		
A.6 APPLICANTS DETAILS If different from above	Title and Name	Tel.	Email



SECTION B: RESEARCHER/S SUPERVISOR/S DETAILS

Position	Title and Name	Tel.	Email
B.1 Supervisor	Dr Charmaine Cunningham	0216501965	Charmaine.Cunningham@uct.ac.za
B.2 Co-Supervisor/s			

SECTION C: APPLICANT'S RESEARCH STUDY FIELD AND APPROVAL STATUS

C.1 Degree – if applicable	Doctorate of Philosophy in Emergency Medicine
C.2 Research Project Title	An Action Research Approach to Developing a Recognition of Prior Learning Conceptual Framework for Post-Graduate Studies in Emergency Medicine
C.3 Research Proposal	Attached: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
C.4 Target population	UCT Students registered on the Post Graduate Diploma of Emergency Care
C.5 Lead Researcher details	If different from applicant: 01438499, Dr Charmaine Cunningham, 0216501965, Charmaine.Cunningham@uct.ac.za
C.6. Will use research assistant/s	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> If yes, provide a list of names, staff/student no., e-mail and contact details:
C.7 Research Methodology and Informed consent	Research methodology: Quantitative online questionnaire Informed consent: Advised to participants
C.8 Ethics clearance status from UCT's Faculty Ethics in Research Committee /Chair (EIRC)	Approved by the UCT EIRC: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> With amendments: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> (a) Attach copy of your UCT ethics approval. Attached: Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> (b) State date / Ref. No / Faculty of your UCT ethics approval: 19/11/2022 Ref. / Faculty: 041/2022

SECTION D: APPLICANT/S APPROVAL STATUS FOR ACCESS TO STUDENTS FOR RESEARCH PURPOSE (To be completed by the ED, DSA or NOMINEE)

	Approved / With Terms / Not	* Conditional approval with terms	Applicant/s Ref. No.:
D.1 APPROVAL STATUS	(i) Approved <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> (ii) With terms <input type="checkbox"/> (iii) Not approved <input type="checkbox"/>	a) Access to students for this research study must only be undertaken <u>after</u> written ethics approval has been obtained. b) In event any ethics conditions are attached, these must be complied with <u>before</u> access to students.	NTTDEB002 / Ms Debbie Winstanley
D.2 PREPARED BY:	Designation Personal Assistant	Name <i>Nadierah Pienaar</i>	Signature  Date of Approval 28/07/2023
D.3 APPROVED BY:	Designation Executive Director / Nominee Department of Student Affairs	Name <i>Mr Pura Mgolombane</i>	Signature  Date of Approval 28/07/2023

Appendix 5: Honey and Mumford Learning Style Questionnaire with Summary

Honey and Mumford: Learning Styles Questionnaire

NAME: _____

STUDENT NUMBER: _____

There is no time limit to this questionnaire. It will probably take you 10-15 minutes. The accuracy of the results depends on how honest you can be. There are no right or wrong answers. Please complete each statement for an accurate analysis of your individual learning style. When you have completed the questionnaire, click in 'your summary' worksheet for an overview of your learning style.

If you agree more than disagree with the statement, place a '**1**' in the answer column. If you disagree more than agree with the statement, leave it **blank**. For example:

a	I am happy today	1
---	------------------	---

		ANSWER
1	I have strong beliefs about what is right and wrong, good and bad.	
2	I often act without considering the possible consequences.	
3	I tend to solve problems using a step-by-step approach.	
4	I believe that formal procedures and policies restrict people.	
5	I have a reputation for saying what I think, simply and directly.	
6	I often find that actions based on feelings are as sound as those based on careful thought and analysis.	
7	I like the sort of work where I have time for thorough preparation and implementation.	
8	I regularly question people about their basic assumptions.	
9	What matters most is whether something works in practice.	
10	I actively seek out new experiences.	
11	When I hear about a new idea or approach I immediately start working out how to apply it in practice.	
12	I am keen on self-discipline such as watching my diet, taking regular exercise, sticking to a fixed routine etc.	
13	I take pride in doing a thorough job.	
14	I get on best with logical, analytical people and less well with spontaneous, "irrational" people.	
15	I take care over the interpretation of data available to me and avoid jumping to conclusions.	
16	I like to reach a decision carefully after weighing up many alternatives.	
17	I'm attracted more to novel, unusual ideas than to practical ones.	
18	I don't like disorganised things and prefer to fit things into a coherent pattern.	
19	I accept and stick to laid down procedures and policies so long as I regard them as an efficient way of getting the job done.	
20	I like to relate my actions to a general principle.	

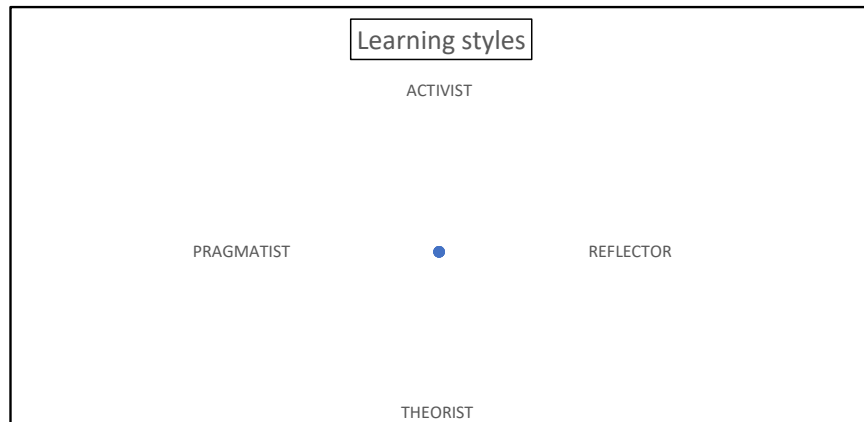
21	In discussions I like to get straight to the point.	
22	I tend to have distant, rather formal relationships with people at work.	
23	I thrive on the challenge of tackling something new and different.	
24	I enjoy fun-loving, spontaneous people.	
25	I pay meticulous attention to detail before coming to a conclusion.	
26	I find it difficult to produce ideas on impulse.	
27	I believe in coming to the point immediately.	
28	I am careful not to jump to conclusions too quickly.	
29	I prefer to have as many sources of information as possible -the more data to mull over the better.	
30	Flippant people who don't take things seriously enough usually irritate me.	
31	I listen to other people's point of view before putting my own forward.	
32	I tend to be open about how I'm feeling.	
33	In discussions I enjoy watching the manoeuvrings of the other participants.	
34	I prefer to respond to events on a spontaneous, flexible basis rather than plan things out in advance.	
35	I tend to be attracted to techniques such as network analysis, flow charts, branching programmes, contingency planning, etc.	
36	It worries me if I have to rush out a piece of work to meet a tight deadline.	
37	I tend to judge people's ideas on their practical merits.	
38	Quiet, thoughtful people tend to make me feel uneasy.	
39	I often get irritated by people who want to rush things.	
40	It is more important to enjoy the present moment than to think about the past or future.	
41	I think that decisions based on a thorough analysis of all the information are sounder than those based on intuition.	
42	I tend to be a perfectionist.	
43	In discussions I usually produce lots of spontaneous ideas.	
44	In meetings I put forward practical realistic ideas.	
45	More often than not, rules are there to be broken.	
46	I prefer to stand back from a situation and consider all the perspectives.	
47	I can often see inconsistencies and weaknesses in other people's arguments.	
48	On balance I talk more than I listen.	
49	I can often see better, more practical ways to get things done.	
50	I think written reports should be short and to the point.	
51	I believe that rational, logical thinking should win the day.	
52	I tend to discuss specific things with people rather than engaging in social discussion.	
53	I like people who approach things realistically rather than theoretically.	

54	In discussions I get impatient with irrelevancies and digressions.	
55	If I have a report to write I tend to produce lots of drafts before settling on the final version.	
56	I am keen to try things out to see if they work in practice.	
57	I am keen to reach answers via a logical approach.	
58	I enjoy being the one that talks a lot.	
59	In discussions I often find I am the realist, keeping people to the point and avoiding wild speculations.	
60	I like to ponder many alternatives before making up my mind.	
61	In discussions with people I often find I am the most dispassionate and objective.	
62	In discussions I'm more likely to adopt a "low profile" than to take the lead and do most of the talking.	
63	I like to be able to relate current actions to a longer-term bigger picture.	
64	When things go wrong I am happy to shrug it off and "put it down to experience".	
65	I tend to reject wild, spontaneous ideas as being impractical.	
66	It's best to think carefully before taking action.	
67	On balance I do the listening rather than the talking.	
68	I tend to be tough on people who find it difficult to adopt a logical approach.	
69	Most times I believe the end justifies the means.	
70	I don't mind hurting people's feelings so long as the job gets done.	
71	I find the formality of having specific objectives and plans stifling.	
72	I'm usually one of the people who puts life into a party.	
73	I do whatever is expedient to get the job done.	
74	I quickly get bored with methodical, detailed work.	
75	I am keen on exploring the basic assumptions, principles and theories underpinning things and events.	
76	I'm always interested to find out what people think.	
77	I like meetings to be run on methodical lines, sticking to laid down agenda, etc.	
78	I steer clear of subjective or ambiguous topics.	
79	I enjoy the drama and excitement of a crisis situation.	
80	People often find me insensitive to their feelings.	

SUMMARY OF YOUR LEARNING STYLE

NAME: 0
STUDENT NUMBER: 0

ACTIVIST 0
REFLECTOR 0
THEORIST 0
PRAGMATIST 0



Your results may indicate you have a particular learning style, or a combination. The explanations below explain each style. Awareness of these help you judge how beneficial an activity may be to you

THE ACTIVIST

Activists are this that learn by doing or 'hands on'. They tend to involve themselves and are always keen to try something once, often acting first then considering the consequences afterwards. They enjoy being thrown 'in the deep end' to solve problems and are often natural leaders in groups. The activist enjoys group work and role play scenarios. They do not enjoy working or reading alone, and will not read the manual first!

THE REFLECTOR

Reflectors learn by observing and reflecting on situations. They like to consider all the possibilities and implications before making up their mind. They are great listeners and tend to be cautious and thoughtful. They learn best by observing scenarios and do not enjoy leading groups or tight deadlines.

THE THEORIST

Theorists like to understand concepts. They enjoy scientific research, data analysis and systems. They feel uncomfortable with subjective judgements. They love to question and probe theories and are delighted when presented with scientific research to substantiate learning, They are uncomfortable in emotional situations and unstructured activities. This is the one who will read the manual first!

THE PRAGMATIST

Pragmatists are keen to try things out. They look for new ideas that can be applied to problems. They like to get on with things and tend to get impatient with open-ended discussions; they are practical, down-to earth people. Pragmatists like to understand the 'idea behind the concept', especially if the outcome will be advantageous to them. They struggle to learn if they cannot identify the benefit of the content, or the guidelines are unstructured

Appendix 6: RPL Candidate Interview 2022

Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

1. Do you understand your rights as a research participant with regards to confidentiality, anonymity, withdrawing from the study?
2. Are you comfortable with the limits to confidentiality?
3. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background to qualification

4. Could you elaborate on your qualification;
 - i. What is your qualification? List all if more than one
 - ii. When did you qualify?
 - iii. Where did you complete your qualification?
5. Could you give a brief overview of your work experience since qualifying?
 - i. Services you have worked at (expand on type eg nursing/ICU/ED/EMS/education)
 - ii. Period of time per service
 - iii. Where are you currently working?

PGDIP EC

6. How did you find out about the PGDIP EC
7. What sparked your interest in applying?
8. What did you initially think the PGDIP EC would do for you after completion?

RPL process

Reflect on the RPL process you completed for access to the PGDIP EC programme;

9. Can you remember any specific components that posed a challenge to you?
10. How did you feel about process?
11. Can you recall any specific support structures that you used for the RPL application?

PGDIP EC programme

Reflect back on the duration of 2021/2022

12. Intro was the first module where you were introduced to the online learning system (VULA). How did you find the online learning component?
13. How did you feel about self-directed learning?
14. What were your challenges during the year of study?
15. If you think about UCT (the university offering the programme)
 - i. Were there any areas of support that stood out for you?
 - ii. What were the challenges you faced with the institution?
16. Thinking about the actual studies, and writing of assessments and assignments,
 - i. Were there any components of previous studies that supported you?
 - ii. Were did you find support when required?
 - iii. Did you use any of UCT support services such as writing centre/psych etc?

Post PGDIP EC

17. Looking back now over your year, what stands out in your mind?
18. Do you feel your vocational studies prepared you for the PGDIP EC?
19. How do you think the PGDIP EC enhanced your current employment?
20. Has the PGDIP EC enhanced or promoted life long learning, and if so, how?
21. Is there anything we may have missed that you would like to include as part of your experience during the RPL process and during the programme?

22. How do you feel about having participated in this study? What is your hope for the application of the results?
23. Do you have any questions about the study, the interview, results, or any other part of the process?

Appendix 7: Tutor Charter Questionnaire 1 March 2023

29/12/2024, 18:58

Tutor Charter feedback 1

Tutor Charter feedback 1

Thank you for taking the time to complete this feedback form regarding the Tutor Student Charter. Your feedback is valuable in guiding future use of the Charter. This is the first of three questionnaires, each a month apart.

My research is entitled 'Action Research Approach to Developing a Recognition of Prior Learning Conceptual Framework for Post-Graduate Studies in Emergency Medicine' and aims to develop a conceptual framework for capacity building of vocationally trained learners to transition into postgraduate studies in emergency medicine successfully.

Your consent to participate in this study is voluntary. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw your consent before submitting the questionnaire. Ethical approval has been obtained – HREC042/2022

This questionnaire is for all PGDip EC tutors

* Required

1. Please confirm you consent to this study. If you do not consent, please still submit this form (Ethical approval HREC041/2022). *

- yes, I give consent
- No, I don't consent

2. Please indicate your name *

3. Did any of the students allocated to you choose not to acknowledge the Tutor student charter? *

- Yes
- No

4. Please provide the name/s of these students *

5. Did any students raise concern or objection over the Charter *

- Yes
- No

https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=DQSIkWdsW0yxEjajBLZtrQAAAAAAAAAAAAO__YUKE... 1/2

6. Briefly explain this concern or objection.

7. Have you needed to remind any of the students of the Charter since you first sent it out? *

Yes

No

8. Please provide the names of these students *

9. What was the reason you needed to resend the charter? *

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.



Appendix 8: Tutor Charter Questionnaire 2 April 2023

29/12/2024, 18:59

Tutor Charter feedback 2

Tutor Charter feedback 2

Thank you for participating in my research. I appreciate your willingness to be involved and provide valuable insights. My research is entitled 'Action Research Approach to Developing a Recognition of Prior Learning Conceptual Framework for Post-Graduate Studies in Emergency Medicine' and aims to develop a conceptual framework for capacity building of vocationally trained learners to transition into postgraduate studies in emergency medicine successfully. This is the second questionnaire regarding the Tutor Student Charter. Please answer as detailed as possible, as this paves the way for future use of this charter. Thank you for your support!

Your consent to participate in this study is voluntary. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw your consent before submitting the questionnaire. Ethical approval has been obtained – HREC042/2022

This questionnaire is for all PGDip EC tutors

* Required

1. Please confirm you consent to this study. If you do not consent, please still submit this form (Ethical approval HREC041/2022). *

- Yes, I give consent
- No, I don't give consent

2. Please indicate your name *

3. Have you experienced any recent (in the last 30 days) concerns or objections regarding the Charter by the students? *

- Yes
- No

4. Please name the student. *

5. Briefly elaborate on these concerns or objectives. *

https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=DQSIkWdsW0yxEjajBLZtrQAAAAAAAAAAAAO__YUKE...

1/3

6. Have you had to remind any students of the contents of the Charter in the last 30 days? *

- Yes
- No

7. Please name the student/s. *

8. Briefly elaborate on the reason for this reminder *

9. Have you engaged with the students outside of your stipulated hours? *

- Yes
- No

10. Do you feel this engagement should have been directed at a UCT department/person? *

- Yes
- No

11. Please identify the department/ person that should have been directly contacted *

- VULA
- Finance Department
- Lecturer for a specific module
- Course Convenor
- Other

Appendix 9: Tutor Charter Questionnaire 3 May 2023

29/12/2024, 19:00

Tutor Charter feedback 3

Tutor Charter feedback 3

Thank you for participating in my research. I appreciate your willingness to be involved and provide valuable insights. My research is entitled 'Action Research Approach to Developing a Recognition of Prior Learning Conceptual Framework for Post-Graduate Studies in Emergency Medicine' and aims to develop a conceptual framework for capacity building of vocationally trained learners to transition into postgraduate studies in emergency medicine successfully. This is the last questionnaire regarding the Tutor Student Charter. Please answer as detailed as possible, as this paves the way for future use of this charter. Thank you for your support! Your consent to participate in this study is voluntary. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw your consent before submitting the questionnaire. Ethical approval has been obtained – HREC042/2022

This questionnaire is for all PGDip EC tutors

* Required

1. Please confirm you consent to this study. If you do not consent, please still submit this form (Ethical approval HREC041/2022). *

- Yes, I consent
- No, I do not consent

2. Please indicate your name *

3. How useful was the Student Tutor Charter in allowing boundary setting? *



4. Did any students raise concern or objection over the Charter at any stage? *

- Yes
- No

5. Briefly explain this concern or objection.

https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=DQSIKWdsW0yxEjajBLZtrQAAAAAAAAAAO__YUKE... 1/3

6. Have you needed to remind any of the students of the Charter? *

Yes

No

7. Please provide the names of these students *

8. What was the reason you needed to resend the charter? *

9. Do you have any suggestions on improving the Charter? *

Appendix 10: Open Discussion Guide Tutors 2023

Open Discussion Guide 2022 – The Tutor Discussion

Good morning. Thank you for joining this discussion.

Brief overview of research.

Confirmation of consent:

- a) Can we record this session? (recording to start prior to obtaining verbal consent)
- b) Do you understand your rights as a research participant with regards to confidentiality, anonymity, and withdrawal from the study?
- c) Please confirm you have read the consent form and are comfortable with all components thereof.
- d) Are you comfortable with the limits to confidentiality?
- e) Do you have any questions before we begin?

The tutor role:

- 1) What has been the most challenging aspect of being a tutor?
- 2) What support is needed for the tutors to make this a success?
- 3) What information should we provide the students about the tutor's role?
- 4) Do you need any training or resources e.g. should we add something to the tutor page to better assist you, or set up a tutor manual, or do you think what we have provided is adequate?
- 5) What would you change for tutoring semester 2 (short term)?
- 6) From a tutoring perspective - What should we change for next year(long term)?
- 7) Would you extend your role as a tutor at the end of the year?

Student needs:

- 1) What have you received the most queries on – e.g. library set up, academic writing, course content related, administratively related?
- 2) Are there any additional components the department can investigate to further support the students?

Additional comments specifically related to the student and your support role as a tutor

Appendix 11: Student Feedback Questionnaire 2023

29/12/2024, 18:55

PGDIP EC 2023 student feedback

PGDIP EC 2023 student feedback

Thank you for participating in my research. I appreciate your willingness to be involved and provide valuable insights. My research is entitled 'Action Research Approach to Developing a Recognition of Prior Learning Conceptual Framework for Post-Graduate Studies in Emergency Medicine' and aims to develop a conceptual framework for capacity building of vocationally trained learners to transition into postgraduate studies in emergency medicine successfully.

Completion of this questionnaire should take about 5 minutes. The questions detail your experience with the 2023 Postgraduate Diploma in Emergency Care programme and provide insight into your educational journey. There are no wrong-or-right answers, only those pertaining to you, and your experience.

The questionnaire is anonymised, and your consent to participate in this study is voluntary. Furthermore, you are free to withdraw your consent before submitting the questionnaire. Once the questionnaire is submitted, it cannot be removed as your views will be integrated with those of the other participants and can not be isolated. Ethical approval has been obtained – HREC041/2022

This questionnaire is for all students enrolled in the Post Graduate Diploma in Emergency Care at UCT (2023 student group)

* Required

Consent

Please confirm you consent to this study. If you do not consent, please still submit this form.

1. I consent to participate in this research study. *

Yes

No

https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=DQSIKWdsW0yxEjajBLZtrQAAAAAAAAAAAAO__YUKE... 1/7

Section 2

This section is regarding the Tutors, and the Tutor Student Charter

2. Did you have any personal concerns with the Tutor Student Charter? *

Yes

No

3. Would you elaborate on those concerns?

4. The charter dictated time boundaries that your Tutor would be available. Do you feel these time boundaries were fair? *

Yes

No

5. Would you elaborate on your choice?

6. Considering the Tutors volunteer to help you, were you able to work within the timeframes stipulated?

Yes

No

Section 3

Support opportunities

7. Please indicate if you have used the following services from UCT this year:

- A librarian
- The Writing Centre
- UCT Central Advising and Referral System (UCT CARES)
- The Student Wellness Centre
- ICTS
- Survivor Support Services
- Disability Services
- Vula Support Service
- Financial Services
- None of these

8. If you did not understand an academic concept, would you ask

- Peers on the course
- Peers not on the course
- A Tutor
- The relevant lecturer
- Other

9. If you battled with VULA after hours, who did you ask for help?

- Peers on the course
- Vula Support Service
- A Tutor
- The relevant lecturer
- The Programme Convenor
- An administrator at VULA
- Other

10. Who supported you the most with academic content?

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

11. Did you gain access to the PGDIP EC via the RPL portfolio?

- Yes
- No

12. Do you feel the RPL portfolio portrayed you as a professional person?

- Yes
- No

13. Were there areas in the RPL portfolio that you would like to have added additional information?

- Yes
- No

14. Please elaborate on this?

15. Was the portfolio useful? (Please elaborate on your answer)

16. Do you feel any areas within the RPL portfolio need changing?

- Yes
- No

17. Please elaborate on your answer

18. Would you have preferred feedback on the submitted portfolio?

Yes

No

Appendix 12: Graduate Feedback Questionnaire 2022

29/12/2024, 18:49

Graduate feedback

Graduate feedback

Thank you for all your input and assistance during my research entitled 'Action Research Approach to Developing a Recognition of Prior Learning Conceptual Framework for Post-Graduate Studies in Emergency Medicine'.

This last questionnaire explores the continued education post-graduation from the PGDIP Emergency Care.

Ethical clearance University of Cape Town- HREC041/2022

* Required

1. Please confirm you consent to this study. If you do not consent, please still submit this form (Ethical approval HREC042/2022). *

- Yes, I consent
- No, I do not give consent

2. Did you gain access to the PGDip EC via recognition of prior learning? *

- Yes
- No

3. Since graduating from the PGDIP EC, have you registered for any formal studies (this maybe NQF or Non-NQF aligned, or outside of RSA) ?

- Yes
- No

4. Congratulations! Please let me know what you are studying!

5. Are you planning to register for any formal studies/qualifications in the next two years?

- Yes
- No

6. Congratulations - what are you planing on registering for?

https://forms.office.com/Pages/DesignPageV2.aspx?origin=NeoPortalPage&subpage=design&id=DQSIkWdsW0yxEjajBLZtrQAAAAAAAAAAAAO__YUKE... 1/2

7. Since graduating from the PGDIP EC, do you feel your theoretical, research and management skills have improved?

Yes

No

8. Did this qualification lead to any workplace promotion (this can include financial promotion or physical promotion within employment structural levels)?

Yes

No

9. Reflecting on your year during the PGDIP EC, would you change anything?

This content is neither created nor endorsed by Microsoft. The data you submit will be sent to the form owner.



Appendix 13: Tutor Student Charter

Tutor Student Charter – Post Graduate Diploma in Emergency Care

This charter outlines the agreement between students on the Post Graduate Diploma in Emergency Care and the Tutors allocated to these students by the Division of Emergency Care, University of Cape Town.

By accepting a place at the University each student accepts responsibility for his or her own learning. This requires a commitment to hard work, and to participate fully in academic activities. It also recognizes that if students approach their studies in an open-minded, questioning manner, they will enhance their own educational experience and that of their fellow students and the academic staff.

MUTUAL COMMITMENT

Students undertake to:

1. Treat staff and fellow students with dignity and respect.
2. Respect boundaries of the Tutors and fellow students.
3. Adhere to communication and time agreements.
4. Respect the Tutor allocation, and refrain from contacting other tutors for academic or Tutor related queries.
5. Take responsibility for their own learning, while also interacting constructively with their fellow students, lecturers and Tutors.
6. Not to plagiarise, adhere the Honour Pledge of the University and not submit the work of others as their own.
7. Use University of Cape Town channels directly when university problems are faced.

Tutors undertake to:

1. Treat students and fellow staff with respect and dignity, and without discrimination or favouritism.
2. Be engaging, striving to achieve clarity and to create an environment where questions and enquiry are encouraged.
3. Provide all reasonable assistance to students to enable them to do as well as they can, and to be available via the agreed communication channels to respond to student queries.
4. Refer students to appropriate university channels when required.

Division Expectations:

The tutors are not employed by the University of Cape Town and volunteer their time over and above their commitments to assist students. This charter sets the boundaries between the Tutors and student and expectation of the division. The role of the Tutor is one of support and guidance. They are not expected to pre-read or proof assignments prior to submissions.

The Tutors will share this charter via the preferred route of communicate with allocated students. Please reply to your Tutor to indicate acceptance of the charter, and indicating the correct contact number or email address the Tutor must utilise.

The unique and specific items agreed upon between the Tutor and students:

1. The communication channel we will use during the year is: (For example email using XXX@XXX.com or whats app on 123456789)
2. Times of communication include, or exclude: (for example Mon-Fri 8am - 5pm, Sat 8am -1pm)
3. My turnaround time for response to messages is xxx (for example 24hours)
4. Please plan your time well. One cannot expect a Tutor to respond to a query in the hours prior to an assignment submission. Respect the turnaround time as per point 3
5. The tutors are not there to pre-read assignments or assessment prior to submission. include a few suggested lines for tutor to finalise.

Appendix 14: Turnitin Receipt

Thesis.docx

ORIGINALITY REPORT

20%

SIMILARITY INDEX

17%

INTERNET SOURCES

12%

PUBLICATIONS

3%

STUDENT PAPERS

MATCH ALL SOURCES (ONLY SELECTED SOURCE PRINTED)

6%

★ Debbi Groome, Charmaine Cunningham. "From vocational to graduation: A mixed methods study of support needs for vocational learners pursuing post-graduate education in South Africa", African Journal of Emergency Medicine, 2024

Publication

Exclude quotes On

Exclude matches Off

Exclude bibliography On

Appendix 15: Editing Certificate

Between lines editing

Leatitia Romero
Professional Copy Editor and Proofreader
(BA HONS)

Cell: 083 236 4536
leatitiaromero@gmail.com
www.betweenlinesediting.co.za

5 February 2025

To whom it may concern:

I hereby confirm that I edited the thesis titled: “An Action Research Approach to Developing a Recognition of Prior Learning Framework for Postgraduate Studies in Emergency Medicine”. Any amendments introduced by the author hereafter are not covered by this confirmation. Participants’ verbatim quotes were not edited to maintain their authenticity. The author ultimately decided whether to accept or decline any recommendations, and it remains the author’s responsibility at all times to confirm the accuracy and originality of the completed work. The author is responsible for ensuring the accuracy of the references and its consistency based on the department’s style guidelines.

Leatitia Romero

Affiliations

PEG: Professional Editors Group (ROM001) – Accredited Text Editor
SATI: South African Translators’ Institute (1003002)
REASA: Research Ethics Committee Association of Southern Africa (104)