

Hope for prospective UCT students, despite disappointing NBT results

Students that do well on their National Senior Certificate (NSC) may find that they have disappointing National Benchmark Tests (NBT) results. However, they may still be accepted to the University of Cape Town (UCT), through the extended degree programmes (EDP) in all faculties through the Academic Development Programme (ADP) based in the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED).



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Case studies

When Thabiso wrote the NBT, he had no idea what to expect. “It was different to writing my NSC. I was one of the only people in my school to even consider varsity, so I didn’t have anyone to prepare for the tests with, and my friends weren’t there when I wrote.” He was shocked when he received his results. There was a “huge” difference between his NSC and NBT scores: he was doing well at school, but performed poorly in the NBT.

His experience is not unique. Fellow student, Chumane, also found that there was a big difference between his NSC and NBT results. “I thought I’d do well in the NBT, because I was doing well at school, but I did very poorly in the NBT mathematics test.”

Maths and literacy differences

In 2015, the NBT Project found that in general, NBT mathematics and quantitative literacy scores were markedly lower than NSC mathematics, mathematics literacy and physical science scores, amongst the 2014 NBT writers. Similarly, NBT academic literacy scores were markedly lower than NSC English home language and English first language scores (NBT National Report, 2015).

This difference can be explained by the fact that the aims of the NSC and the NBT are different. The aim of the NSC is to assess mastery of the school curriculum. The aim of the NBT is to determine whether candidates will cope with the demands of higher education study. A high NSC score therefore does not guarantee a high NBT score.

Many countries – including South Africa -- are recognising that there is a gap, sometimes referred to as an ‘articulation gap’, between the competencies that high schools leavers achieve and the academic demands required to succeed at university. This gap is where the NBT and programmes like the University of Cape Town’s Academic Development Programme (ADP) can play a role. The NBT can provide information about the disparity and the ADP can assist in developing the student’s academic competencies.

Accepted for Engineering

Despite being disappointed by their NBT results, both Thabiso and Chumane were accepted to UCT: Thabiso to the Engineering and Built Environment Faculty and Chumane to the Faculty of Science.

Both students found the first semester challenging. “When you come from school, there is a lot of change. Your brain cannot cope with it all. It’s difficult to adapt,” said Thabiso. After failing his first semester, he decided to take his lecturers up on their offer to switch to the extended degree programme (EDP), which allowed him to undertake his first year of study over two years.

According to UCT’s Science Faculty, it is common for students to have trouble when making the transition from high school to university, as the quantity of work and the pace at which students are expected to process it is vastly different. “Experience has shown that many first year students can overcome the difficult transition by taking a reduced load in their first year,” they advise.

Both Chumane and Thabiso wrote tests for all their courses during their first semester. Their scores on these tests, along with their NSC and NBT results, revealed they would be better placed on the BSc and BSc (Eng) extended degree programmes, run by the ADP.

ASPECT, the extended degree programme in the Engineering Faculty, is designed for students who have not been adequately prepared for tertiary study, and it is structured so that students receive additional academic and general support.

Improved results

Since moving to the extended degree programmes, both Thabiso and Chumane’s marks have improved dramatically. Thabiso attributes this to the individual attention he is receiving. “On ASPECT, you have people who know what it takes to make a good student. They take our situation into account, they know us and they have time to attend to all of us.” Chumane says that his marks have improved because “the lecturers have more one-to-one contact with us. There’s more time to cover all the content.”

Their experience is evidence that the NBT and the interpretation of NBT scores can contribute to students’ academic development and success. Both students would encourage others in a similar situation to join the programme. “If you’re accepted,” advises Chumane, “do consider the EDP. You don’t want to be excluded. Going from high school to varsity is a huge step. We all want to finish in minimum time, but it doesn’t always work out like that.”

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