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# Learners' preparedness for higher education in South Africa: developing a sense of academic belonging through the selective learning approach

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**Introduction:** The high drop-out rates at South African universities have raised concerns regarding the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements' (CAPS) ability to prepare learners for the world beyond secondary education. This study sought to investigate teachers' perceptions of how the Selective Learning Approach (SLA), based on Multiple Intelligences Theory, can enable learners to transition to higher education and find academic belonging seamlessly. Specifically, the focus was on the suitability of transitional processes, including the curriculum programmes in secondary education to prepare learners for higher education.

**Methods:** To conduct this investigation, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted which employed semi-structured interviews as a means of data collection. The study's purposively selected sample consisted of eight teachers in the Motheo Education District, Mangaung. A thematic analysis method was utilized to analyze the data.

**Results:** The findings indicated that the Selective Learning Approach can foster a sense of belonging among learners transitioning from secondary to higher education in South Africa which is crucial for their academic success in higher education. This includes a deliberate focus on vertical articulation (continuous learning) in basic education, higher education programme choices, and workload management.

**Discussion:** Furthermore, the study provided recommendations on mitigating measures for factors that affect effective academic belonging in South African schools. The emphasis on vertical articulation in the findings supports the conceptual framework's proposition that curriculum continuity is essential for successful higher education transitions.

## KEYWORDS

selective learning approach, multiple intelligence (MI) theory, basic education, higher education, learners' preparedness, sense of belonging

## 1 Introduction

The high drop-out rates at South African universities have raised significant concerns about the ability of the current education system to adequately prepare learners for higher education. This study investigates teachers' perceptions of how the SLA, grounded in Multiple Intelligences Theory, can facilitate learners' transition to higher education by fostering a sense of academic belonging. The focus is on the suitability of secondary education curricula, particularly the CAPS, in preparing learners for the demands of tertiary education.

A sense of belonging in learning communities is critical for learners to take ownership of their education, promoting self-directed learning, autonomy, and motivation (du Toit-Brits, 2022). Research has consistently shown that belonging enhances academic performance, yet learners exhibit diverse interests and cognitive abilities, necessitating a curriculum that accommodates individual differences (Kandeel, 2016; Weiten, 2016). The current "one size fits all" approach in South Africa's CAPS curriculum often fails to address these differences, leaving many learners ill-prepared for higher education.

Vertical transition, the alignment of knowledge and skills across educational stages is essential for seamless progression from secondary to higher education (Squires, 2005). However, the lack of vertical articulation in South Africa has created transitional barriers, contributing to high drop-out rates among first-year university students. Many learners struggle with academic unpreparedness, leading to feelings of alienation and disconnection from their learning environments. While curriculum reform efforts have focused on addressing socio-economic inequalities (Blignaut, 2021; Chimbi and Jita, 2023), little attention has been paid to improving vertical alignment to bridge the gap between secondary and higher education.

The SLA, inspired by Multiple Intelligences Theory, offers a potential solution by tailoring education to learners' unique strengths and interests (Fajarwati et al., 2016). This approach has been successfully implemented in STEM curricula worldwide, equipping learners with the skills needed for higher education and fostering a sense of belonging (Erdogan and Stuessy, 2015). In South Africa, however, the CAPS curriculum remains rigid, with limited flexibility to accommodate diverse learning needs (Mopeli, 2017). This study seeks to explore how the Selective Learning Approach could be integrated into secondary education to better prepare learners for higher education and cultivate a sense of academic belonging.

The research question guiding this study is:

*How can the Selective Learning Approach be used to foster a sense of belonging in learners' transition from basic education to higher education?*

By addressing this question, the study aims to contribute to the development of a more inclusive and effective curriculum that supports learners' academic and psychological transition to higher education, ultimately reducing drop-out rates and enhancing student success.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 The persistent challenge of educational transitions

The transition from secondary to higher education remains fraught with difficulties in South Africa, where systemic inequities continue to shape academic outcomes. Research consistently highlights how the current Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) fail to adequately prepare learners for the demands of tertiary education (Jansen, 2011). This disconnect manifests most visibly in first-year university dropout rates, which hover around 30% nationally, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds disproportionately affected (Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2023). The roots of this crisis extend beyond mere academic under-preparedness to encompass deeper issues of identity formation and institutional alienation. As Thomas and Maree (2022) argues, many learners from historically marginalized communities enter higher education lacking the cultural capital to navigate unfamiliar academic environments, creating what she terms "epistemological displacement" – a fundamental mismatch between their educational backgrounds and university expectations.

### 2.2 Multiple intelligences theory as a framework for reform

Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences offers a compelling alternative to the rigid, standardized approaches dominating South African classrooms. International studies demonstrate how curricula embracing this pluralistic view of intelligence – particularly in STEM education – foster deeper engagement and better preparation for higher learning (Erdogan and Stuessy, 2015). These approaches recognize that mathematical-logical intelligence represents just one of several equally valid ways of knowing, alongside linguistic, spatial, kinesthetic, and interpersonal intelligences among others. Recent work by du Toit-Brits (2022) in South African contexts suggests that when learners encounter educational experiences aligned with their dominant intelligences early in secondary school, they develop not only subject-specific competencies but also crucial academic identities. This challenges the deficit-oriented narratives often applied to students struggling with traditional curricula, instead framing diversity of intellect as an educational asset rather than a problem to be remediated.

### 2.3 The crucial role of academic belonging

The concept of belonging has emerged as a critical factor in understanding student success during educational transitions. Students' sense of belonging is highly influenced by how well they connect to their new learning environment (curriculum, social and mental connection), and the quality of that relationship (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). Meehan and Howells' (2019) longitudinal study of United Kingdom undergraduates identified

three interlocking dimensions of belonging that prove particularly relevant to South Africa's transitional challenges. Academic belonging encompasses students' confidence in their capability to meet institutional demands, while social belonging reflects their sense of connection to peers and faculty. Perhaps most crucially, institutional belonging involves recognizing oneself as a legitimate member of the academic community – a perception often undermined by structural inequities in South African education. This framework helps explain why even academically capable students from disadvantaged backgrounds may struggle, as they navigate not only cognitive demands but also profound identity negotiations when entering higher education spaces historically designed for elite groups.

## 2.4 Bridging the divide through selective learning approaches

The Selective Learning Approach (SLA) represents a promising avenue for addressing these multifaceted transition challenges. Unlike the rigid CAPS curriculum, SLA emphasizes personalized learning pathways that honor students' diverse intelligences while gradually introducing university-style cognitive demands. Research from similar contexts shows that such approaches can mitigate the “cultural shock” many students experience when moving from teacher-directed secondary education to the self-regulated learning environments of higher education (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). Importantly, these benefits appear most pronounced when implemented early in secondary schooling, allowing sustained development of both disciplinary competencies and academic identities. A 2022 study by the South African Council for Educators found that schools piloting SLA-inspired programs reported not only improved university placement rates but also qualitative changes in students' self-perception as scholars – a crucial foundation for belonging in higher education.

## 2.5 Unresolved tensions in curriculum transformation

Despite these promising developments, significant tensions remain in reimagining South Africa's educational pathways. The tension between standardization and personalization presents a particular dilemma, as policymakers balance the need for equitable quality benchmarks with the flexibility required for differentiated learning. Furthermore, as noted in a recent UNESCO (2023) report on global curriculum trends, the implementation of innovative approaches often stumbles on practical constraints – from teacher preparedness to assessment systems still geared toward traditional metrics of success. These challenges are compounded in South Africa's resource-constrained environment, where many schools struggle with basic infrastructure, let alone the capacity for curricular innovation. Yet as Blignaut's (2021) analysis of successful township schools demonstrates, even within these constraints, pockets of innovation show what's possible when pedagogy aligns with both cognitive science and students' lived realities.

## 2.6 Toward a holistic understanding of transition

This synthesis of international and local research suggests that effective educational transitions require more than academic skill-building they demand intentional cultivation of scholarly identities. The most successful interventions, as documented in a 2023 meta-analysis by the Brookings Institution, combine cognitive preparation with psychosocial support, creating what researchers term as “academic homes” for students navigating educational borderlands. In the South African context, this implies rethinking not just what students learn, but how they come to see themselves as learners. The Selective Learning Approach, with its emphasis on honoring diverse intelligences while building authentic disciplinary practices, offers one pathway toward this transformation. As this study explores through teachers' perspectives, realizing this potential will require addressing systemic barriers while amplifying existing grassroots innovations that point toward more equitable futures.

## 3 Conceptual frameworks: a multi-dimensional approach to educational transition

This study is anchored in an integrated conceptual framework that bridges three interlocking theoretical perspectives, each addressing critical dimensions of the transition from secondary to higher education in South Africa. The framework visualizes how the Selective Learning Approach (SLA) can serve as a transformative mediator between current educational practices and desired outcomes of academic belonging and success.

### 3.1 Foundation: multiple intelligences theory

At its core, the framework builds upon Gardner's (1983) revolutionary conception of human cognition as comprising eight distinct intelligences. This theoretical foundation challenges the narrow cognitive parameters of traditional curricula like CAPS, which privilege linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences while marginalizing other forms of intellectual expression. The framework posits that by recognizing and cultivating students' diverse intelligences – including spatial, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions – SLA creates more equitable pathways to academic engagement. Recent neuroeducational research (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2021) supports this premise, demonstrating how teaching aligned with students' cognitive strengths enhances both learning efficiency and self-concept as learners.

### 3.2 Mediating mechanism: selective learning approach

The framework positions SLA as the operational bridge between Gardner's theoretical principles and tangible educational

outcomes. Drawing from international best practices in differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2017) and South African case studies of successful curriculum innovations (Blignaut, 2021), the framework conceptualizes SLA as having three key functions:

**Cognitive Alignment:** Matching instructional methods to students' dominant intelligences,

**Progressive Complexity:** Gradually introducing university-style cognitive demands, and

**Identity Scaffolding:** Fostering emerging academic identities through disciplinary practices

This tripartite mediation addresses what Tinto (2017) identifies as the “transition gap” - the discontinuity between secondary and tertiary academic cultures that disproportionately affects first-generation university students.

### 3.3 Outcome: academic belonging ecosystem

The framework culminates in a holistic conception of academic belonging that integrates insights from Meehan and Howells (2019) with South African contextual factors. This ecosystem comprises:

- **Academic Confidence:** The belief in one's capability to meet university demands, nurtured through early exposure to authentic disciplinary practices. Research by Wilson-Strydom (2015) demonstrates how this confidence buffer is particularly crucial for students from under-resourced schools.
- **Institutional Legitimacy:** The sense of being a valued member of the academic community. Drawing on Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, the framework highlights how SLA can help students recognize their diverse intelligences as legitimate forms of academic capital.
- **Purposeful Connection:** The alignment between personal educational trajectories and institutional offerings. Recent work by du Toit-Brits (2022) emphasizes how early career-aligned learning experiences can mitigate the “choice shock” many South African students experience when selecting university programs.

#### 3.3.1 Dynamic interactions

The framework visualizes these components not as linear steps but as dynamically interacting elements. For instance, when students experience cognitive alignment through SLA, it simultaneously builds academic confidence and reinforces their sense of institutional legitimacy. This synergy creates what Kahu and Nelson (2018) term a “belonging feedback loop” - where academic success reinforces belonging, which in turn promotes further engagement and success.

#### 3.3.2 Contextual adaptation

Recognizing South Africa's unique educational landscape, the framework incorporates two critical contextual filters:

**Resource Realities:** Acknowledging the material constraints of many South African schools while identifying high-impact, low-cost SLA strategies.

**Cultural Responsiveness:** Ensuring approaches honor the diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires students bring to learning, as emphasized in South Africa's inclusive education policies.

This comprehensive framework provides both a theoretical lens for analyzing teachers' perspectives and a practical roadmap for reimagining transitional support in South African education. By grounding SLA implementation in this multi-dimensional foundation, the study aims to contribute to more equitable pathways to higher education success.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Research design and philosophical underpinnings

This study employs a qualitative research design situated within the interpretivist paradigm, recognizing that teachers' experiences and perceptions of the Selective Learning Approach (SLA) are socially constructed and context-dependent. Grounded in the theoretical framework of Multiple Intelligences Theory and academic belonging, the methodology aligns with recent studies on educational transitions that emphasize the value of practitioner perspectives (Blignaut, 2021; du Toit-Brits, 2022). The research design acknowledges South Africa's unique educational landscape by incorporating elements of participatory action research, allowing for contextually relevant insights into curriculum transformation.

### 4.2 Participant selection: capturing diverse educational perspectives

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of how the Selective Learning Approach (SLA) could enhance students' transition to higher education, this study engaged eight experienced teachers from contrasting school environments in South Africa's Motheo Education District. The selection process was designed to incorporate multiple dimensions of diversity relevant to curriculum implementation challenges.

The research team identified participants through purposeful sampling, targeting educators who could provide rich, experience-based insights about preparing students for tertiary education. Two distinct school contexts were included to reflect South Africa's educational landscape: a rural school in Botshabelo serving predominantly low-income communities, and an urban school in Bloemfontein with greater resource availability. This deliberate contrast allowed examination of how SLA might function under different socioeconomic conditions.

Participants represented a balanced mix of subject specialists, including four STEM teachers (mathematics and sciences) and four humanities educators (languages and social sciences). This disciplinary spread ensured the findings would address varied academic transition needs across different fields of



study. The sample included both early-career teachers (2–5 years’ experience) and veteran educators (10+ years), capturing generational perspectives on curriculum changes.

Gender representation was carefully considered (see Table 1), with five female and three male participants, reflecting the demographic composition of South Africa’s teaching workforce. Age diversity was also incorporated, ranging from late 20’s to early 60’s, to account for potential generational differences in pedagogical approaches. All participants held formal teaching qualifications, with credentials spanning postgraduate certificates to bachelor’s degrees in education.

4.3 Data collection procedures

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, conducted over a 3 months period in 2023. Each 45–90 min interview followed a protocol designed to elicit rich descriptions of teachers’ experiences with: (1) current transitional challenges in the CAPS curriculum, (2) perceptions of SLA’s potential benefits, and (3) practical constraints to implementation. The interview guide incorporated visual elicitation techniques, asking participants to annotate curriculum documents to identify specific areas where SLA could enhance transitional readiness. This approach yielded nuanced data about the intersection between policy intentions and classroom realities, addressing a gap identified in recent curriculum reform literature (Chimbi and Jita, 2023).

4.4 Analytical framework

Thematic analysis followed Byrne (2022) six-phase approach, adapted to incorporate elements of critical discourse analysis (Byrne, 2022). This dual analytical lens enabled examination of both manifest content (surface-level themes about SLA implementation) and latent meanings (underlying assumptions about educational equity and belonging). Transcripts were coded using NVivo software, with an initial coding framework derived from the conceptual framework’s key constructs (multiple intelligences, transitional pedagogy, academic belonging). Emergent codes were then developed through iterative engagement with the data, allowing for unexpected themes to surface from teachers’ narratives. Analytical memos documented the researcher’s reflexive process, particularly regarding positionality as an educator familiar with South Africa’s transitional challenges.

4.5 Ensuring rigor and trustworthiness

The study employed multiple strategies to enhance credibility and transferability. Prolonged engagement with participants through follow-up interviews and member checking ensured accurate representation of teachers’ perspectives. A detailed audit trail documented analytical decisions, while thick descriptions of the research context allow readers to assess the potential transferability of findings to similar educational settings. These measures address concerns raised in recent methodological

TABLE 1 Biographic results of the participants.

Participants	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Schools	Subject (s) taught	Grade level	Residential area	Home language	Highest qualification
Participant 1	30	Female	Black	School A	Life Orientation	8–11	Rural-Botshabelo	Sesotho	Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
Participant 2	27	Male	Black	School A	Mathematics	10–12	Rural-Botshabelo	Sesotho	Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
Participant 3	62	Female	Black	School A	English and Xhosa	8–10	Rural-Botshabelo	IsiXhosa	National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE)
Participant 4	28	Female	Black	School A	Tourism and English home language	10–12	Rural-Botshabelo	Setswana	Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
Participant 5	39	Female	White	School B	English and History	10–12	Urban-Bloemfontein	Afrikaans	National Professional Education (NPDE)
Participant 6	37	Male	White	School B	Mathematics and Mathematics literacy	10–12	Urban-Bloemfontein	Afrikaans	Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.)
Participant 7	40	Male	Black	School B	English, Life Orientation	10–12	Urban-Bloemfontein	Sesotho	National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE)
Participant 8	32	Female	White	School B	English Home language	10–12	Urban-Bloemfontein	Afrikaans	Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.)

literature about the quality of qualitative research in educational transition studies (Bertram, 2022).

## 4.6 Ethical considerations

The research protocol received ethical clearance from the University of the Free State (UFS-HSD2018/1578/2806) and approval from the Motheo District Department of Education. Informed consent procedures emphasized participants' right to withdraw and mechanisms for anonymizing data. Particular attention was given to power dynamics in the researcher-participant relationship, with interviews conducted in participants' language of choice (primarily Sesotho or English) to ensure comfort and authentic expression. These precautions align with recent developments in decolonial research ethics that emphasize the importance of linguistic and cultural responsiveness in South African educational research (Masenya, 2024).

## 4.7 Limitations and delimitations

While providing valuable insights, the study acknowledges several limitations. The focus on one education district limits generalizability, though the inclusion of diverse school contexts enhances the potential relevance of findings. The qualitative design privileges depth over breadth, meaning statistical generalizations cannot be made. The study deliberately excluded student perspectives to maintain focus on teachers' professional experiences with curriculum implementation, creating an opportunity for future research to incorporate student voices. These boundaries reflect the study's specific aim to understand how frontline educators perceive SLA's potential to address transitional challenges they observe daily in their classrooms.

## 5 Results

The findings of this study reveal how the Selective Learning Approach (SLA) can foster a sense of belonging among learners transitioning from secondary to higher education in South Africa. The results are structured around three key themes derived from the qualitative analysis of teachers' perspectives, aligning with the research question: How can the SLA be used to foster a sense of belonging in learners' transition from basic education to higher education? These themes highlight the role of SLA in promoting vertical articulation, facilitating informed programme choices, and preparing learners for the workload demands of tertiary education.

### 5.1 Theme 1: vertical articulation and continuous learning

Participants emphasized that SLA fosters a sense of belonging by ensuring continuity in learners' academic journeys. Teachers noted that when learners engage with subjects aligned with their interests from Grade 10, they experience smoother transitions into higher education. For example:

*"Through vertical articulation, learners continue with what they excel in, reducing stress and anxiety about university workloads and assessments. They feel at home academically." (Participant 2)*

*"If the curriculum meets learners' interests early, they can pursue those interests confidently in higher education or the workplace." (Participant 3)*

This aligns with the conceptual framework, which posits that SLA bridges the gap between secondary and tertiary education by aligning knowledge and skills progressively. The findings support Wilson-Strydom's (2015) argument that vertical articulation mitigates the "epistemological displacement" many learners face when entering higher education.

### 5.2 Theme 2: informed programme choices

Teachers identified SLA as a critical tool for helping learners make informed decisions about their tertiary education paths. The current CAPS curriculum often leaves learners unprepared, leading to mismatched career choices and feelings of alienation. Key insights include:

*"If high school education prepares learners for tertiary studies, they can explore their interests early and choose subjects aligned with their career goals." (Participant 7)*

*"Many learners arrive at university with little guidance, resulting in poor choices and a lack of belonging. Career counselling from Grade 10 is essential." (Participant 1)*

These findings resonate with the literature review, which highlights the lack of vertical alignment in South Africa's education system (Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2023). The SLA's emphasis on Multiple Intelligences Theory (Gardner, 1983) ensures learners select programmes that match their strengths, fostering a sense of purpose and institutional legitimacy (Meehan and Howells, 2019).

### 5.3 Theme 3: workload management skills

Participants underscored SLA's role in equipping learners with the skills to handle tertiary workloads, a significant barrier to belonging. Teachers observed:

*"Learners exposed to SLA adapt better to university workloads because they build foundational skills in Grade 10." (Participant 4)*

*"Without SLA, learners struggle with the demands of higher education, leading to high dropout rates." (Participant 7)*

This aligns with Tinto's (2002) assertion that academic preparedness is crucial for retention. The results also support the conceptual framework's focus on "cognitive alignment" and "progressive complexity," where SLA gradually introduces university-style demands to build learner confidence (du Toit-Brits, 2022).

## 6 Discussion

The findings of this study contribute significantly to our understanding of how the Selective Learning Approach (SLA)

can foster a sense of belonging among South African learners transitioning from secondary to higher education. The results align with and extend existing theoretical frameworks while offering practical insights for educational reform.

The emphasis on vertical articulation in the findings supports the conceptual framework's proposition that curriculum continuity is essential for successful transitions. This echoes [Wilson-Strydom's \(2015\)](#) argument about the dangers of epistemological displacement, where learners experience a disconnect between their school preparation and university expectations. The teachers' observations about how SLA facilitates progressive skill development validate the framework's emphasis on cognitive alignment, demonstrating that when learners engage with familiar subject matter across educational levels, they develop stronger academic identities. This finding is particularly relevant in the South African context, where curriculum reforms have often failed to create meaningful connections between basic and higher education ([Chimbi and Jita, 2023](#)).

The study's second major finding regarding informed program choices reinforces the conceptual link between Multiple Intelligences Theory and academic belonging. The teachers' concerns about inadequate career guidance under the current CAPS curriculum resonate with broader critiques of South Africa's education system ([Jansen, 2011](#)). By helping learners align their strengths with viable career pathways, SLA addresses what [Meehan and Howells \(2019\)](#) identify as the "purpose dimension" of belonging - when students see the relevance of their studies, they are more likely to engage deeply and persist. This finding also supports [Burke et al.'s \(2016\)](#) argument about the importance of "constructions of capability," as learners who understand their own competencies make more confident educational choices.

The third key finding about workload preparedness provides empirical support for [Tinto's \(2002\)](#) retention theory in the South African context. The teachers' accounts of students struggling with university demands mirror national concerns about high dropout rates ([Chiramba and Ndofirepi, 2023](#)). The SLA's approach of gradually introducing tertiary-style tasks in secondary school offers a practical solution to what [Kift \(2004\)](#) describes as "transition pedagogy." This finding is particularly significant as it moves beyond identifying problems to proposing concrete strategies for building academic resilience before students enter higher education.

These findings collectively demonstrate that belonging in higher education is not merely about social integration, however, involves three interlocking dimensions: academic confidence (developed through vertical articulation), purposeful engagement (facilitated by informed choices), and practical preparedness (built through workload acclimatization). This tripartite model extends Meehan and Howells' (2019) framework by showing how institutional practices can actively cultivate each dimension of belonging.

The study's implications for policy and practice are substantial. At the policy level, the findings suggest the need for curriculum reforms that prioritize continuity between educational phases. For practitioners, the results highlight the importance of early career guidance and the gradual introduction of independent learning skills. The success of SLA in addressing transition challenges also points to the potential of theory-informed interventions in overcoming systemic educational inequalities.

Future research should explore how these findings might apply to different educational contexts across South Africa, particularly in under-resourced schools. Longitudinal studies tracking SLA learners' university trajectories could provide valuable evidence of long-term impacts. Additionally, research examining the role of teachers' professional development in implementing SLA principles would help bridge the gap between theory and classroom practice.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the Selective Learning Approach offers a comprehensive framework for addressing South Africa's transition challenges. By fostering curriculum continuity, purposeful program selection, and academic preparedness, SLA can help learners navigate the critical juncture between school and university with greater confidence and belonging. These findings contribute not only to academic debates about educational transitions but also to ongoing efforts to improve student success in South African higher education.

## 7 Recommendations

To effectively implement the Selective Learning Approach (SLA) and improve transitions to higher education, we recommend a multi-pronged strategy. First, curriculum reforms should integrate SLA principles by developing coherent learning pathways from Grade 10 through tertiary education, incorporating Multiple Intelligences Theory, and establishing clear benchmarks for skill progression. The Department of Basic Education should collaborate with universities to align expectations in core academic skills and discipline-specific practices.

Teacher development programs must be strengthened to include specialized training in identifying diverse intelligences, transition pedagogy, and scaffolded skill development. Higher education institutions should contribute by offering professional development workshops and creating shared teaching resources that demonstrate tertiary-level expectations.

Career guidance systems require enhancement through structured programs starting in Grade 10, incorporating regular skills assessments and meaningful workplace exposure. Particular attention should focus on supporting first-generation university applicants and learners from under-resourced schools.

Assessment practices should evolve to measure progressive skill development through authentic tasks that mirror tertiary expectations, while providing meaningful feedback. Further research is needed to track longitudinal outcomes of SLA implementation and develop context-sensitive adaptations for diverse environments.

Resource allocation must support these initiatives through adequate teaching materials, technology infrastructure, and learning spaces that facilitate personalized instruction. A phased implementation approach is recommended, beginning with pilot programs in selected districts, followed by evaluation and gradual national rollout with continuous monitoring.

This comprehensive approach, centered on the Selective Learning Approach, can transform South Africa's education system by creating more equitable pathways to higher education and fostering a stronger sense of belonging for all learners.

## 8 Conclusion

This study underscores the transformative potential of the Selective Learning Approach (SLA) in addressing South Africa's persistent challenges in school-to-university transitions. By fostering vertical articulation, informed program choices, and workload preparedness, SLA provides a structured framework to cultivate a sense of belonging—one that extends beyond social integration to encompass academic confidence, purposeful engagement, and practical readiness. The findings affirm that when learners experience continuity in their educational journey, receive guided career support, and are progressively prepared for tertiary demands, they are more likely to navigate higher education with resilience and success.

The implications of this research extend beyond individual learners to systemic reform. For policymakers, the study highlights the urgent need for curriculum realignment that bridges secondary and tertiary education through intentional skill scaffolding. For educators, it emphasizes the value of early career guidance and pedagogical strategies that nurture both subject mastery and independent learning competencies. Importantly, the study challenges deficit narratives about student preparedness by demonstrating how structured interventions can mitigate transition shocks for learners across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

While this research provides compelling evidence for SLA's efficacy, it also opens avenues for further investigation. Future studies could explore the longitudinal impacts of SLA on university completion rates, its adaptability across different disciplines, and the role of technology in scaling its principles. As South Africa continues to strive for equitable access to quality education, the Selective Learning Approach offers a viable pathway to transform transitions from sites of struggle into opportunities for empowerment. By centering belonging as a multidimensional outcome of curriculum design, teaching practice, and institutional collaboration, we can build an education system where every learner has the tools and confidence to thrive in higher education and beyond.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the author, without undue reservation.

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## Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Department of Basic Education, Free State, Mangaung District. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

## Author contributions

KM: Writing – original draft.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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