

Wits first-year pass-rate for mathematics dropped by 37% ! 'Inflated matric results' created unjustified expectations – Dr Belinda Huntley

The minister of higher education and training, Dr Blade Nzimande, recently said that the way South Africa determines who studies at the country's universities should be re-assessed. Dr Nzimande said that experienced workers and school-leavers without matric exemption should be allowed to study at university. He noted that only 18% of last year's matriculants gained university entrance, and said that this was not a true reflection of the potential of these matriculants. He was quoted as calling on universities to 'do something extra to identify students with potential'. He suggested that universities could look into additional entrance exams to allow entry, but did not clarify how this would be managed. Dr Nzimande recommended that there be increased recognition of prior learning, to allow adults with work experience to study at tertiary institutions.

There are two chief factors precluding an increase in the number of students in our universities. South African universities are already at maximum capacity, and would struggle to cope with many more students. Furthermore, it is questionable whether many students who achieved university exemption in last year's exams actually deserved it. It was reported in *Business Day* last month that the first-year pass-rate for mathematics at the University of the Witwatersrand had dropped by 37%. The newspaper quoted Dr Belinda Huntley, of the university's mathematics department as saying that this trend had been seen at a number of other universities. These included the universities of Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Cape Town, KwaZulu-Natal, North West, and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. Dr Huntley said that although it was normal for students to see a drop in their marks from matric to their first year, the drop this year had been 'drastic'. She also noted that the 'inflated matric results' had created unjustified expectations.

The value of a matric certificate is also questionable. In order to gain a National Senior Certificate, or to pass matric, a pupil need only to get more than 40% in three subjects, and 30% in three others. To qualify to study for a bachelors degree, a pupil must get more than 30% in the 'language of learning and teaching of the higher education institution', and more than 50% in four other subjects.

Looking at individual subjects, a worrying trend emerges. Of the nearly 300 000 pupils who wrote mathematics (it is now compulsory for students to take either mathematics or mathematical literacy), only 30% managed to get more than 40% in the final exam. Trends in other subjects are also a cause for concern. Some 176 000 pupils wrote the matric accounting exam last year, and only 31% managed more than 40%. Nearly 220 000 pupils wrote physical science, but only

29% managed to achieve 40% or more. The trends are similar for subjects such as geography, economics, life sciences, and history. It must be asked why a pass-mark of 40% is seen as adequate? It is unlikely that a person has a proper grasp of a subject if they only achieve 40% for it.

It is doubtful whether the average South African matric pupil receives education of sufficient quality to prepare them for the rigours of university. South Africa's universities are already overcrowded and forcing sub-standard pupils on to them will worsen the problem. Dr Nzimande may be right that a matric exemption rate of 18% is not an accurate reflection of the potential of the country's youth. However, the reason for the low matric exemption rate is the poor basic education that many children receive. The fact that only 30% of the pupils who wrote the mathematics paper in 2008 managed to answer more than 40% of the answers correctly is a testament to the failures of the country's basic education system.

Dr Nzimande and his colleagues in the Cabinet will need to do a number of things if his wish for greater access to university is to be fulfilled. Firstly, the quality of primary and secondary education has to be seen to. As noted above, the majority of pupils who leave the school system are woefully unprepared for the worlds of work and tertiary education. Dr Nzimande is putting the cart before the horse by insisting that universities expand access when children are receiving poor pre-university education. The proof of this can be seen in the high drop-out rates that universities experience. For example, of the first-year class of 2000 (the latest year for which the Institute has figures) only 22% had graduated by the end of 2003. Insisting on expanding access to universities will only damage the sector.

However, a further acceptance of the role of prior learning will also be important, and could play a role in deepening South Africa's shallow pool of skilled workers. It remains to be seen how Dr Nzimande will ensure that this becomes a reality.

It is clear that increasing access to university will not be a panacea for the country's skills shortage. Furthermore, it is probably not practical to expect mature students to attend university with students in their first year out of school. Dr Nzimande should focus on ensuring that other post-secondary training options are also open to those who would like to study further, be they school-leavers or mature workers. The dysfunctional Sector Education and Training Authority (Seta) system needs to be repaired. Previously Setas fell under the Department of Labour, but they are now the responsibility of Dr Nzimande's department. It remains to be seen whether this will result in an improvement in the functioning of these entities.

Dr Nzimande has also said that the old artisan training colleges should be re-introduced. Here he is right. Although a number of artisans have been produced by the country's further education and training (Fet) colleges, it has not been in

sufficient numbers. The re-introduction of artisan training colleges will open another route to those who cannot, or do not want to go to university, and go some way to addressing the artisan shortage that South Africa suffers from. Dr Nzimande is also correct in his call for the re-opening of nursing, teachers' training, and agricultural colleges. This too, will take some of the pressure off universities to accept new students. All FET colleges will also fall under the auspices of his department, having previously been run by provincial governments. A recent *Business Day* article showed that a third of students who had taken vocational training courses at Fet colleges had failed. The colleges will need to be managed better by Dr Nzimande's department to ensure they make a meaningful contribution to the tertiary education sector.

Dr Nzimande is correct in attempting to increase access to tertiary education, and by calling for the recognition of prior learning. It remains to be seen whether South Africa's tertiary education sector will flourish under Dr Nzimande, or whether it will continue to wallow in mediocrity.

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