

TWENTY YEARS OF DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA: A CRITIQUE OF THE EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENT JOURNEY.

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Abstract:

South Africa has made significant strides politically, economically, socially and educationally, since the advent of democracy in 1994. Having rescued the country from an abyss of national disaster, the spirit and iconic role of its first President, the late Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, continues to prevail over the country and guide developments. From an educational perspective, the amalgamation of the nineteen ex-departments that served the different racial groups, into a single National Department of Education, which administers a single national education system, is one of the greatest accomplishments of the Ministry of Education. However, the establishment of a single national system for education and, more specifically, for examinations and assessment, has not been without its challenges, given the historical, ideological and structural differences that existed between the nineteen previous departments of education. The country has since established a successful National Examination system that administers public exit examinations to almost 900 000 learners on an annual basis and has initiated the development of a large scale National Assessment programme for learners in the General Education and Training Phase. This paper traces the development of examinations over the last twenty years and provides a critical appraisal of the gains and the limitations that are barriers in the field of examinations in South Africa. The paper then proceeds to articulate the examination improvements that are currently underway or that are proposed by the author to address these the limitations identified.

Keywords:

Public Examinations; Curriculum; Standards; School Based Assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sunday, 27 April 2014 marked the 20th anniversary of democracy in South Africa. Since the first general elections, where members of all ethnic and racial groups, and across the political divide, in celebratory spirits, cast their first vote, an incredible amount of water has passed under the proverbial bridge. South Africa has successfully hosted international events and has fast become a beacon of democracy, in Africa. As the country reflects on its twenty year journey, all spheres of society are being placed under the microscope for closer inspection. Education has certainly not escaped that scrutiny.

Under the apartheid government, schooling was deliberately designed on the basis of a racially segregated and an inferior Bantu Education system, to achieve and regulate the selective underdevelopment of black learners (Mathonsi, 1988). Therefore, the newly established democratic government, pursued as its prime national objective to dismantle and

repair the damages of the apartheid education and to provide equal opportunities for all learners.

A key indicator of the performance of the schooling system in South Africa is the achievement of learners in the exit level examination at the end of Grade 12, commonly referred to as the Matric Examination. At the individual learner level the performance in the Grade 12 examination will determine the learner's entry into higher education or the work place. At the system level it provides evidence of performance at the national, provincial, district and school level. The Grade 12 examination results are a key systemic indicator of whether government is making progress in improving equity and quality in educational opportunities and outcomes and whether government is providing the necessary skills pool needed to invigorate the South African the economy.

Given the importance of the examination system as an indicator of learner performance which has far reaching consequences for a number of key stakeholders, it is therefore justifiable to interrogate the progress made in the establishment and maintenance of a quality examination and assessment system within the democratic era.

2. SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

This twenty year review will focus on the examination system in the Republic of South Africa. There are various types and forms of assessment and the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement, Grades 10 -12, (2011)*, distinguishes between informal (assessment for learning) and formal assessment (assessment of learning). This review will focus on the formal assessment, and more specifically on the external examinations administered at the end of twelve years of schooling. The two forms of assessment, which will form the basis of this review, will be the Grade 12 external examinations and the school based assessment component that contributes to the exit qualification.

3. FRAME OF REFERENCE FOR THE REVIEW

The South African Examination system will be evaluated in the context of the three competing purposes in any assessment event which includes informing educational improvement, evaluating students, and evaluating schools and teachers. However, quality assessment is the fundamental goal of any examination and system, therefore, in attempting to critique the current South African examination and assessment system, quality assessment should be the main criterion. Quality assessment has to be explained so that the gains or limitations of the South African examination and assessment system, over the last twenty years can be evaluated against the principles and criteria outlined for quality assessment. The "big three" criteria for evaluating educational assessment are reliability, validity and assessment bias.

Basically, reliability of results of an assessment opportunity refers to the extent to which a similar result would be obtained if the same assessment were to be repeated. Reliability also refers to the consistency with which a test measures whatever it is measuring. Therefore,

reliability is equal to consistency (Popham, 2005:30). Validity is described as the degree to which a test measures what it intends to measure and also refers to the accuracy of the inferences that are made from the test scores. Popham (2005:94) concludes that assessment bias is an aspect of assessment procedure that offends or unfairly prejudices students because of personal characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, or other such group-defining characteristic. Assessment bias distorts certain students' performances on educational tests, and thus reduces the validity of the score in terms of the inferences that can be made about the students.

4. THE PRE-DEMOCRATIC ERA

The development of the examination and assessment system must be fore-grounded by the historical developments in the country's education system since policy changes in education impact directly on the assessment of learners in the schooling system. The South African education system during the early days of colonialism was divided along colonial territories of the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and the Orange Free State (OFS). The responsibility for providing education was initially vested with the missionaries and then transferred to the Colonial Administrators. Each Colonial Government had a department of education headed by a Superintendent of Education (Behr, 1984). School Inspectors were later added as functionaries to service the departments of education, working under the Superintendent. The Superintendent together with the school inspectors visited each school once a year to inspect the school and assess pupils for promotion to higher classes (Bot, 1952; Behr 1984)

In 1948 the National Party won the Whites only elections and adopted apartheid as the official policy of Government. In 1949 the Eiselen Commission was appointed to investigate the education system that should be provided to different population groups and the commission recommended separate education systems for different populations groups. The then Minister of Native Affairs, Dr Verwoerd championed the promulgation of the Bantu Education Act of 1953. The Act was premised on the notion that Whites were cognitively superior and Africans were cognitively inferior and therefore both needed to be indoctrinated accordingly. The role of an African was that of a labourer, worker, and servant only. As H.F Verwoerd, the architect of the Bantu Education Act (1953), asserted "There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour. What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when he cannot use it in practice? That is quite absurd. Education must train people in accordance with their opportunities in life, according to the sphere in which they live." (Kalaway, 2002:15). This was the philosophy that governed education and assessment in the years prior to 1994.

According to Kanjee and Prinsloo, (2005), two main points emerge from an analysis of the history of assessment practices in South Africa and they are, that firstly, assessment practices were closely linked to the oppressive apartheid policies of the state, and, secondly, assessment practices have their origins within the psychological sector in South Africa. The State used testing (intelligence) to produce and perpetuate theories of intellectual differences between races. Mathonsi (1988) and Nzimande (1995) have argued that tests were intentionally misused to deprive blacks access to resources and opportunities and to stifle their intellectual development so that the needs of the white minority in terms of cheap

labour could be met. This also manifested in an elaborate system of tests and examinations by means of which control into the economy was regulated (Swartz, 1992). Therefore the education system was geared towards rote learning and was examination orientated. The development of critical thought and active student involvement in the learning process was discouraged. Since learners were perceived as passive recipients of information (Kallaway, 1984).

The external examination administered after twelve years of schooling, has a history of almost 156 years in South Africa. This examination was first administered in 1858, under the University of the Cape of Good Hope. Lolwana (2006), categorises the Senior Certificate into three distinct phases: The first was the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) phase (1918-1992), which was the first period of a formal matriculation examination system in South Africa. The second was the South African Certification Council (SAFCERT) era (1992-2001), which saw the centralization of the certification process and the third phase is the Umalusi era (2002 – present), which focuses on quality assuring the Senior Certificate. The pre-democratic era will therefore include the JMB phase and part of the SAFCERT era.

From 1918 to 1920, the JMB, was the only examining body, so the matriculation examination soon established itself as the only school-leaving certificate and gateway to universities. The JMB's approach to the maintenance of standards was primarily through the control of syllabi and curricula, moderation of question papers and the later establishment of the statistical moderation of examination results. Trümpelmann (1991) gives a detailed account of the problems that continued to plague the JMB regarding its capability and irregularities. Examination standards were also continuously contested under the JMB.

During the period 1918 to 1953, the JMB was confronted with the major challenge of decentralization of the examination to provinces (Lolwana, 2006). From 1921 the examinations were gradually decentralized to provinces, but controlled by the JMB. The other impetus for decentralization, according to Malherbe (1977), was the concern that the JMB papers were prepared largely by the University professors who were out of touch with the school situation. However, by 1980 it was abundantly clear that the decentralization of examination had aggravated the problems relating to control of standards and there was a strong quest to reinstate central control.

The JMB was subsequently replaced by the South African Certification Council (SAFCERT), established in terms of the South African Certification Council Act No. 85 of 1986. The main functions of the Council included:

- (a) the issuing of matriculation certificates.
- (b) the determination, with the approval of the committee of University Principals, the standard required for admission to higher education,
- (c) the establishment of national norms and standards for certification, and
- (d) guidance to education departments in the then self governing territories with regard to matters concerning matriculation examinations.

SAFCERT was responsible for the issuing of a common certificate even though the examinations were administered by nineteen ex-departments of education that were based on racial and administrative segregation. It is however alleged that SAFCERT applied its standard keeping function in a discriminatory manner to in terms of the different examining bodies. Due to the low levels of provisioning to the homelands and ex-departments of Education and Training (DET), and the resultant low learner performance in these systems, SAFCERT was lenient in its statistical adjustments for these departments to give the impression that these homelands were working. Further allegations point to Government Printers that were responsible for the printing of question papers and to some examiners who intentionally leaked the question papers to destabilise the examinations for Africans, Coloureds and Indians (Lolwana, 2006)

5. THE DEMOCRATIC DISPENSATION

There has been significant progress in the development of the Public Examination System in South Africa over the last twenty years, despite the inherent historical baggage. The Public Examination system in South Africa is comparable in administration and standards to the best in the world. Under the apartheid government, examinations were administered by each of the nineteen ex- education departments and this resulted in different standards across and between them. In 1994, with the birth of the new dispensation, the nineteen education departments were integrated into one national Department of Education, hence, the need and logic for one national examination system. The transition to a single national system of examinations has been gradual and twenty years down the line, the realisation of a national standard which can be regarded as internationally comparable, is beginning to materialise. The establishment of the external quality assurance council, Umalusi, as the custodian of the national standard has advanced the course of a national examination system, and the establishment and maintenance of a national standard.

The tracking of the twenty year journey of Public Examinations in South Africa, will be done in three periods which are marked by both the changes in the management and administration of examinations during this period:

- (a) 1994 - 1999: Provincially managed examinations.
- (b) 2000 - 2007: Introduction of nationally set question papers
- (c) 2008 – 2014: A national examination system

Changes that have been instituted during each of these periods have been driven by the need for greater quality in the delivery of examinations, and therefore improved reliability, validity and a minimisation of assessment bias.

5.1. 1994 – 2007: Provincially Managed Examinations

In 1994, post the first democratic elections, there was a refinement of the curriculum but the examinations continued to be set and managed by the nineteen ex-departments. The new democratic government had the initial and mammoth task of amalgamating the nineteen racially segregated education departments into one national department and nine provincial education departments, before it could even consider the administration of

examinations under the new dispensation. It was only in 1996, that the first examinations under the democratic government was administered by the nine Provincial Education Departments, and quality assured by the South African Certification Council (SAFCERT).

The Provincial Education Departments (PEDs) were faced with major challenges in the first few years of the administration of examinations. Each of the provincial education departments had to set up its own examination systems and in many of the provinces systems had to be built from scratch (Poliah, 2001). There has been a high degree of collaboration and co-operation between the nine provincial education departments and the national department of education, to ensure that the examination systems in the provincial departments conform to certain minimum standards. This resulted in the drafting of the national policy on the conduct of the Senior Certificate examination, which provided the standard for the conduct of the Senior Certificate examinations in each province. This ensured that all candidates in the country irrespective of race or location wrote the examination under similar conditions.

The question papers for this examination were set by the provincial education departments, who appointed individuals with the required expertise to set the question paper and the question paper was sent via the post office or private courier companies to SAFCERT for moderation. The provincial examining bodies addressed the quality of marking and mechanisms were put in place to improve the quality of marking. These included, *inter alia*, that unqualified and inexperienced teachers were excluded from the marking process, installation of rigorous security measures at marking centers to control access to marking sites and to ensure the security of the scripts, the execution of marking under controlled conditions to improve the quality assurance of marking, and the stipulation that no marker be allowed to mark more than 300 scripts for the duration of the marking session, thus ensuring that remuneration is not the key motivation at the expense of quality marking. Also, special checkers were appointed to verify that every single script was marked completely and the marks are accurately totaled.

However, the PEDs battled with the integrity required in the administration of this examination as the practices of the ex-departments were brought together. Examination irregularities which were rife, tainted the public perception of this examination (Lolwana, 2006). The major achievement in this examination was the standardisation of the results, a function that was carried out by SAFCERT. The norms for the standardisation process in 1996 were not racially determined, as was the case prior to 1996, but were formulated in accordance with the provincial demarcations. This implied that there was a common norm for all candidates in a province. This was a major contribution to equity in the education system (SAFCERT, 2000). The other major transformational input by SAFCERT, was the execution of its standardisation function, in a transparent and uniform manner across all Examining Bodies (Poliah, 2001). The norms were made available to the Examining Bodies for their comments before being uniformly applied across all Examining Bodies.

Despite SAFCERT having taken on the responsibility of quality assuring the Senior Certificate examination across the nine provincial examining bodies, SAFCERT

nonetheless struggled with its own credibility, given its own historical track record. Therefore in 1998, Minister Bengu, appointed a new Council, which was representative of a democratic South Africa and from that point SAFCERT has engendered a strong commitment to transforming its role and image so that it appropriately executes its function of quality assurance. In addition, in 1999 the SAFCERT Act was amended to align the organisation with the transformational imperatives of the education sector.

In 1998 Minister Bengu, appointed a committee to evaluate the Senior Certificate examination and one of the findings of this committee was that learners who wrote their non-language subjects in a language other than their first/mother tongue language, were at a considerable disadvantage not only in terms of their own performance (i.e. whether they could fully understand the question and effectively convey their understanding to the examiners) but also because they were being assessed in comparison with other candidates who were writing in their first/mother tongue language. It was therefore proposed by this committee that in the case of learners who offered an African language as a First Language in the Senior Certificate examination, but not in English or Afrikaans as a First Language, the adjusted marks of their non-language subjects be multiplied by 1,05 (Department of Education, 1998). This implied that candidates would receive a compensation of 5% of the marks gained in their non-language subjects. This practice was implemented and retained and eventually terminated with the 2013 National Senior Certificate examination.

Despite the role played by SAFCERT and its attempt to ensure a common standard across the nine provincial examination systems, there were serious limitations that emerged and were addressed in subsequent years. These included:

- (a) The setting of separate question papers by the individual provincial education departments, where, despite the moderation of these question papers by SAFCERT, there were differences in the structure, format, scope and standards of the question papers from one province to the other. This is captured in Poliah, (2001: 6), “nine different standards of question papers are written and these candidates are finally issued with one Senior Certificate”.
- (b) The formulation of nine different norms for the standardisation of the Senior Certificate results and the hosting of nine provincial standardisation meetings by SAFCERT, reinforced the notion of nine different standards.
- (c) The structure of the examination varied from one province to the other. Prior, to 1999, the Western Cape Provincial Education Department included as part of the final promotion mark, a school based assessment component, referred to as Continuous Assessment (CASS). In 1999 and 2000, Northern Cape and Gauteng Education Departments added the CASS mark as part of the final promotion mark. This further exemplified the differences between the provincial examining bodies. This was confirmed in the evaluation undertaken by Cambridge Examinations in 1999 (Department of Education, 1999).

5.2. 2000 – 2007: The Setting of National Question Papers.

From 2000, the then Department of Education took on the responsibility of initially setting national examination question papers in five key subjects, then scaled up to six subjects and finally increased to 11 of the Grade 12 gateway subjects. The initiative was introduced to set a common national standard in these subjects across all PEDs, which would serve to improve the standard of learning, teaching and assessment at school level and also to improve the capacity required for the setting of question papers in the Examining Body. This key process was preceded by the setting of a common Examination Guideline, for the eleven subjects, which ensured that the question papers in these subjects were based on a common format and structure.

The critical standard setting process that was initiated with the setting of national question papers was the hosting of national marking guideline discussions, before the answer scripts were marked. This entailed a meeting of the chief markers and internal moderators from each of the Provincial Education Departments, who after having marked a sample of the scripts discussed each question in the paper and the desired candidate responses. This allowed for inputs from all provinces to be incorporated into the marking guideline and provided a common and agreed standard for application in the marking process by all PEDs.

With a renewed focus on school based assessment (SBA), in 2000, the then Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, placed a 25% cap on the weighting of CASS across all PEDS, to ensure that the negative impact of CASS is kept at a minimum level across all PEDs. Also, in the case of Examining Bodies, where CASS was not implemented at all or where certain subjects were excluded from CASS, 1,25% (that is, 25% of 5%) points were added to the adjusted examination mark. This intervention served to compensate candidates for any disadvantage which may have resulted from the absence of a CASS score. This measure was only used for the 2000 examination. From 2001 all Examining Bodies were compelled to implement CASS (SAFCERT, 2000).

SAFCERT in 2000 conducted a preliminary evaluation of CASS practices across PEDS and this evaluation confirmed that the assessment methods, the evidence being submitted and the evaluation of the evidence by the teachers varied considerably from one Examining Body to the other and within an Examining Body the practice varied from one district to the other and from one school to the other (SAFCERT, 2000). In an attempt to establish a degree of consistency in the assessment practices across Examining Bodies, SAFCERT together with the Department of Education initiated a process to regularize CASS in five subjects. A three-day workshop was convened for each of these five subjects and representatives from each of the Examining Bodies participated. This three-day workshop resulted in the development of a Subject CASS Guideline document, which specified the constituent components and scope of CASS and also provided CASS exemplars for use in schools.

In 2002, with the promulgation of the *General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Act, 2001 (Act No. 86 of 2001)*, Umalusi was established as the

successor to SAFCERT, with an expanded quality assurance mandate. It was during this period that the concept of the national examination system was beginning to take form and root. These were challenging years for examinations in South Africa as the new unified education system required the integration of the disparate systems of the ex-departments, together with the capacity building in requisite skills and knowledge required by the examination units in each of the provinces.

The year 2007 marked the last year that a fully fledged examination based on the old Senior Certificate curriculum, namely Report 550, which was an examination comprising the 11 nationally set examination question papers and various other provincially set examination question papers.

5.3. 2008 – 2014: The National Examination System.

With the introduction of the National Curriculum Statement in 2008, the national Department of Education took on the responsibility of setting all question papers required for the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination. This entailed the setting of 130 question papers for 28 subjects. Only Life Orientation was assessment internally at school level by the teacher.

The first National Senior Certificate examination underpinned by the National Curriculum Statement, Grades 10-12, was conducted in November 2008 and it was built on the strengths of the Senior Certificate examination. All examination question papers were set by the Department of Education and externally moderated by Umalusi. This ensured that a common standard was implemented and maintained across all subjects.

In addition to the setting of national question papers, the National Department also enhanced the marking process by strengthening the criteria for the appointment of markers, conducting national marking guideline discussions for all subjects, reducing the number of markers supervised by a senior marker, and enforcing stricter moderation procedures across all marking centres.

Over the period in focus, substantial progress was and is being made in terms of the establishment and maintenance of a credible national examination system, and these include the following:

- a) The development of a sound legislative framework that regulates the administration of the examinations across the nine Provincial Education Departments, and mandates the Department of Education to set norms and standards and monitor the implementation.
- b) The setting of national standards through the setting of national question papers for all subjects by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), which are written by learners in all Provincial Education Departments. This ensures that every learner in the country writes the same examination, and is therefore, assessed using a common yardstick.
- c) The development of a rigorous monitoring system that ensures that all PEDs comply with the policy and regulations relating to the administration of exams. The

- monitoring system has over the years has been extended to include an intensive systems audit that covers the entire examination cycle.
- d) Strong collaboration between the DBE and the nine Provincial Education Departments (PEDs), through the National Examinations and Assessment Committee (NEAC), gives effect to the principle of cooperative governance, enshrined in the Constitution. NEAC is not only responsible for policy proposals, but also for the establishment of structures to ensure that the whole examination process is successfully conducted.
 - e) The establishment of national and provincial moderation systems for School Based Assessment (SBA), which includes Life Orientation. This has contributed to the improvement of the quality of the tasks set and moderated at school level for School Based Assessment. There is still much professional development and policy enhancement work to be done in this area.
 - f) The provision of assessment exemplars that provide educators and subject advisors with samples of questions and tests pitched at the appropriate level, which has assisted in the setting of benchmarks for school assessment. This has also been extended to Common Assessment Tasks (CATs) in Life Orientation and to the provision of exemplars of learner evidence relating to learner responses to examination questions in selected high enrolment subjects.
 - g) The establishment of the Quality Assurance Council, Umalusi that replaced SAFCERT and takes full and final responsibility for the quality assurance of the NSC examination and School Based Assessment. Umalusi is able to issue a common National Certificate, if it is satisfied that the examinations and the assessments have fully complied with the national standard.
 - h) To promote the international comparability of the NSC question papers, the DBE embarked on an international evaluation of question papers in 2007, 2011 and 2013, during which question papers for ten major subjects were evaluated by the three reputable assessment bodies, namely; Cambridge International Examinations (CIE), Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) and Board of Studies New South Wales (BSNSW).

6. A CRITIQUE OF THE TWENTY YEAR EXAMINATION JOURNEY

Upon reflecting on the examination system, one is impressed by the significant gains made in transforming examinations in South Africa from nineteen different racially based examining bodies into a single national system. During this period there has been a remarkable improvement in examinations credibility (Ndlovu; Sishi and Nuga, 2006). However, year after year, when examination results are released, there are still persistent criticisms of the standard of the examination, the pass requirements, the standardization process conducted by Umalusi, the apparent knowledge gaps in learners seeking admission to University and the language competency of learners (Lolwana, 2006). Therefore, this critical appraisal, based on the fundamental assessment principles of reliability, validity and assessment bias, is intended to identify key components of the examination system, highlight the limitations and make recommendations for improvement that is required. However, given the length of this paper, the appraisal will be restricted to three key areas.

(a) A Single National Examination System – the current realities.

Despite the progress from a fragmented examination system to a national system it can be argued that the South African examination system is not really a single national system. Instead, the South African education system comprises a national Department of Education, that is responsible for the determination of national policy and the monitoring of policy compliance, and nine provincial education departments that are responsible for policy implementation. In terms of public examinations, the national department is responsible for the development of policy relating to examinations and assessment, the monitoring of policy compliance, the setting of the national question papers, and the standardization of the marking guideline, while the provincial education department are responsible for the administration of examinations, the marking of the scripts, the capture of data and the release of the results. In addition, the South African examination system has an external, independent Quality Assurance Council, Umalusi that is responsible for the final quality and standard of the examination. This implies in practice that the South African examination system seemingly operates at two levels in that it is nationally controlled but provincially administered. The greater contradiction is the legislative reference to the DBE and the nine Provincial Education Departments as Assessment Bodies, each in their own right. This implies that public examinations in South Africa are managed by ten (10) Assessment Bodies.

The quality of the national question papers that are written by all candidates in the system has improved significantly (this has been attested to by the Quality Assurance Council), and there has been positive gains made in the overall administration of examinations. However, the major challenge currently is the marking of the examination scripts which is based on a nationally determined marking guideline that is applied in the marking of scripts conducted in the nine provinces, under the management of the provincial education department. A sample moderation of the marking is conducted by the Department of Basic Education (formerly known as the National Department of Education), and Umalusi, but there are concerns about the variation in marking standards across the nine provincial education departments (Umalusi, 2013). Therefore, the question that arises is whether the South African examination system is in essence a single national examination system.

It is therefore proposed that the legislation relating to the governance of public examinations, be amended to declare the DBE as the Assessment body and the provincial education departments as the administrative arms of the national Assessment body. This will then imply that the responsibility for public examinations in the country, resides with the DBE and hence there can be a greater semblance of a single national system. This may be the short-term solution but in the longer term change needs to address the current location of examinations with the DBE and PEDs, which also have the core responsibility for educational provision. The Minister has to give serious consideration to the establishment of an independent examination board that is a separate entity from the institution responsible for teaching and learning. This will certainly enhance the credibility of examinations in the country and calm the voices of dissent associated with perceived state manipulation, when any improvement in national learner performance is announced by the Department of Basic Education.

(b) The Standards Debate – Are we getting it right?

The Joint Matriculation Board (JMB), the South African Certification Council (SAFCERT) and the Quality Assurance Council, Umalusi, have respectively, over the years been the custodian of examination standards. However, these institutions, as in all other countries, have endured much turbulence during their historical transitions.

The National Senior Certificate examination and its predecessor the Senior Certificate, has been the subject of continuous debate regarding the standard of the examination and the subsequent certificate that is issued. In the last five years there has been a steady increase in the overall pass rate and accusations have been leveled at the DBE for lowering the standard of question papers. Concerns have been raised about the standard of marking across PEDs and whether PEDs are not becoming lenient in their marking to boost their pass rates, especially since PED performance is synonymous with their performance in the National Senior Certificate examination. The standardization of the results which is a responsibility of Umalusi, has also attracted much attention as a standard setting process and its independent role in maintaining standards has not been convincing to all stakeholders. The bulk of criticism against the National Senior Certificate has been the pass requirements. Even though the pass requirements are differentiated into the four categories of passes, with University admission requiring a minimum of four subjects at 50% from a designated list of subjects, there has been an avalanche of criticism directed at the minimum requirement of 30% that a candidate can achieve to obtain a school leaving certificate.

In terms of the setting and approval of question papers, the DBE has a robust process which includes setting of the question papers by a panel of experts, internal review and external moderation and approval by Umalusi. The DBE has over the last three years, benchmarked a sample of the question papers with Cambridge International Examinations (CIE), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Board of Studies, New South Wales (BSNSW). Higher Education South Africa (HESA), an institution which represents all the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country has also been included in this evaluation process.

The DBE has also embarked on an item banking process, which is intended to replace the current panel approach to setting. The DBE should fast track the item banking intervention and ensure that the pre-testing component of this project is prioritized so that there is greater confidence in the quality and standard of items that are used in the examination. To further enhance the standard of examinations from year to year and to ensure a high degree of comparability, it is recommended that the DBE or its successor, the independent examination board, introduce anchor items which will provide valuable comparative data from year to year.

With respect to the international benchmarking of question papers, this initiative must be extended to all question papers on a rotational basis, and there must be a more formal relationship between the benchmarking institutions and the DBE, so that a structured and formal programme to address the areas of deficiency can be initiated, implemented and monitored to ensure that the DBE is abreast of international discourse and innovation in question paper development..

The decentralization of marking to Provincial Education Departments warrants urgent review, since the decentralisation of marking to nine different sites implies nine different standards. The DBE is currently exploring the centralization of marking through the physical relocation of marking to a central point and the adoption of an electronic marking approach, in a bid to eradicate the provincial variances that currently prevail.

(c) School Based Assessment (SBA)

The implementation of SBA has been a challenge since its inception in 2001. The primary reason for the ambivalence around SBA, is the lack of clarity relating to the purpose of SBA based on its inclusion as a promotion requirement for all subjects offered as part of the NSC (Poliah, 2010:48). SBA is an important formative assessment tool but when it serves as a summative assessment component, as part of a high stakes exit qualification, it needs to be rigorously controlled and quality assured. The SBA at the Grade 12 level, in the South African context is in the main test dominated (Umalusi, 2004:57).and therefore it is argued that it is a duplication of the external examination. There is huge disparity in the quality of SBA from one school to the other and across education districts, given the resource limitations at certain schools and the lack of teacher competency relating to the designing of assessment tasks (Umalusi, 2013).

The low reliability of the school based assessment (SBA) marks has serious negative consequences not only for the quality of the NSC as a certificate, but for the system. One of them is that candidates with inflated marks have a false sense of achievement (Van der Berg and Shepherd, 2008), which leads to disillusionment when they receive their final examination results which may be lower in a particular subject than they had anticipated. Given the level of unreliability of the SBA marks, Umalusi statistically moderates these SBA marks based on the examination marks and this has been the practice over the last fourteen years. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has to review the model of SBA in the country and establish a clear purpose for SBA, and consider restricting SBA to one controlled assessment that focuses on assessing skills and knowledge that cannot be assessed under controlled examination conditions. If the task is nationally designed and administered at the school level over an extended period, under the direct supervision of the teacher, it will lead to improved reliability. The central designing of the task will assist in ensuring that the assessment is not a duplication of the assessment constructs that are tested in the external examination and thus promote the notion of alternative forms of assessment.

7. CONCLUSION

The twenty year journey has certainly been fruitful as well as challenging. The greatest achievement is the transition from the nineteen ex-departments, each presenting its own standard and format of the exit examination, to the establishment of a unitary system of examinations and assessment that is not used surreptitiously to limit the life opportunities of young adults based on race. There is still a long and winding road to be travelled but the foundations are laid for the construction of a credible and robust examination system. The greatest gains and the challenges over this period can be summarized as follows:

- (a) From a perspective of access, the NSC examination has resulted in an increased number of learners obtaining the National Senior Certificate. In 1993, 242 310 candidates passed the NSC examination, with only 68 820 candidates obtaining admission to University studies (based on a total of 472 458 candidates that wrote). In 2013, out of a total candidature of 562 112, 439 755 candidates obtained the NSC and 171 755 candidates qualified for admission to bachelor studies at Higher Education Institutions. The overall pass rate has increased from 51% to 78.2% in the twenty year period. However, there are criticisms about the NSC not serving as a valid predictor of performance at Higher Education Institutions, and hence a number of Universities are resorting to an alternative benchmarking test to determine University admission.
- (b) From a perspective of standards, Umalusi as a Quality Assurance Council has broadened its quality assurance role compared to the old JMB and the old SAFCERT, but public confidence of the NSC examinations is still in question. More attention needs to be devoted to the international benchmarking process, the pre-testing of items, the use of anchor items and the improvement in the competency of examiners. The marking process is in need of review to ensure that marking standards are maintained across every subject, every script and from year to year.
- (c) From a perspective of reliability and validity, the examinations have attained a level of reliability, but its reliability rating is threatened by the 25% SBA component, which is lacking in reliability and in validity. The Umalusi statistical moderation of SBA assists in limiting the negative impact of SBA on the final results, and therefore a review of SBA and its application is needed.
- (d) From a perspective of fairness, the examinations are taken under conditions that are relatively similar across the country, but not all learners are exposed to the same conditions of teaching and learning. This disadvantage is the priority of the South African Government and the language compensation has been an interim measure to partly compensate for the disadvantage, arising from languages. But the principle that examinations cannot be the instrument to correct the shortcomings of the classroom, needs to be upheld.

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