



**3 January 2019**

**Equal Education media statement: “Arrested development: Matric exams are one step in an uphill education path for SA learners”**

Equal Education (EE) reiterates that the annual matric pass rate announcement is a misleading fanfare that, on its own, provides a poor indication of the overall health of the basic education system. This was particularly evident last year when the announcement of a 75.1% matric pass rate for 2017, followed the release of the devastating results of an international reading study – that [78%](#) of Grade 4 learners in our country cannot read for meaning, in any language.

*A narrow preoccupation with the results alone, can conceal the multitude of challenges that confront learners during their schooling career. It also limits the scope of important conversations that should be had about basic education, not only at this time of the year, but consistently.*

The basic education picture is not all bleak. There have been some important, albeit incremental, improvements over the last few years. South Africa has registered improvements in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) assessments, between 2002, 2011 and 2015 - emerging as the the fastest-improving country in grade nine maths and science. This improvement is admittedly from a very low base. Access rates to early childhood education are also improving, and the increase in matric qualifications awarded each year is exceeding population growth.<sup>1</sup>

Passing matric is a tremendous achievement for each individual learner, and we commend the diligence and perseverance of the Class of 2018, their teachers, and their parents.

**The Foundation Phase reading crisis: a national emergency**

Despite some improvements in basic education, it is criminal that we have not been able to solve the

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<sup>1</sup> Kika, J. & Taylor, S., 2018. “Education analysis misses the mark”. *Mail & Guardian*. 7 December 2018. Available at: <https://mg.co.za/article/2018-12-07-00-education-analysis-misses-the-mark>; Department of Basic Education. 2016. *Report on progress in the schooling sector against key learner performance and attainment indicators*. Pg. 3. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/Education%20Sector%20review%202015%20-%202016.pdf>

early grade reading crisis. The years from Grade R to Grade 3 are life-altering for South Africa's learners: it is when the foundation must be laid for learning in all the later grades. The consequence of a weak Foundation Phase is weak academic outcomes in high school – and the consequence of that is that many learners never reach matric, or attain a tertiary qualification. There is no skill more crucial to acquire in the Foundation Phase than learning to read for meaning, and to count.

The DBE acknowledges that the “most effective way to bring about meaningful socio-economic transformation in South Africa, is to improve the teaching and learning of reading in schools serving historically disadvantaged communities”.<sup>2</sup>

EE wholeheartedly agrees that South Africa “needs a pool of zealous, inspired, creative, top-achieving Grade 12 learners and prospective students to pursue studies in education”.<sup>3</sup> But it is an imperative that Foundation Phase student teachers be properly prepared by universities (pre-service training), and that existing teachers are upskilled, to teach our young population.

Prior to the [Early Grade Reading Study \(EGRS\)](#), there was little or no evidence of impactful teacher training initiatives in South Africa, aimed at improving early grade reading. The study showed that children in primary schools where teachers were provided with on-site coaching were 40% of a year's worth of learning ahead of children in schools without intervention. The coaching intervention, which commenced in 2015 in the North West, was found to be the most cost effective model for which there was evidence that learning outcomes could be shifted.

*We reiterate [our call](#) for the DBE to drastically expand the EGRS coaching intervention to other provinces - National Treasury must provide the money to make this possible. We want to remind government and the broader public, that South Africa cannot afford to not make this investment.*

Foundation Phase teachers must be capacitated (through pre-service and in-service training); must be supported by government education officials, parents and the broader public; must be well-remunerated; and must teach in environments that are dignified, safe, and well-resourced.

### **Matric results: a superficial barometer of the education system**

The learning backlogs that develop and deepen in the early years of schooling, are a major contributor to learners dropping out of school. Keeping learners in school and ensuring that they leave school with a meaningful qualification, remains one of the key challenges in South Africa's public education system.

Particularly concerning is that approximately 12% of young people still do not even complete Grade 9. These learners are especially vulnerable as they are less likely to have basic literacy skills and they leave school without any formal qualification. In 2015, almost half of all learners without a Grade 9

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Basic Education, *The Early Grade Reading Study Summary Report*, Pretoria: DBE, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Sayed, Y. & McDonald, Z., 2017, 'Motivation to become a Foundation Phase teacher in South Africa', *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 7(1), a548. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v7i1.548>

qualification – or a General Education and Training Certificate – were in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape.<sup>4</sup>

Due to consistently high learner dropout rates, EE considers the throughput rate alongside the traditional matric pass rate. We define the throughput rate as the percentage of learners who were in Grade 2 together, and who 10 years later went on to pass matric together. One could also consider a similar calculation for learners who were in Grade 10 together, and who go on to pass matric two years later.

In contrast to the DBE’s claim that the matric pass rate has consistently been above 70% over the past few years and that it is increasing<sup>5</sup>, a look at the throughput rate suggests that the pass rate has actually been declining and ranges between 41% and 37%:

**Table 1: Throughput rates for matric exams**

Matric cohort	Number of learners in Grade 2, 10 years earlier	Number of learners in Grade 10, 2 years earlier	Learners writing matric	Learners passing matric	Traditional matric pass rate	Throughput rate from Grade 2 to matric	Throughput rate from Grade 10 to matric
2015	1 118 690	1 106 913	668 122	455 825	71%	41%	41%
2016	1 054 582	1 100 877	610 178	442 672	73%	42%	40%
2017	1 022 853	1 074 746	534 484	401 435	75%	39%	37%

Sources: 2006, 2007, 2014 and 2015 Schools Realities Report, 2015 and 2016 NSC Technical Report, 2016 NSC Exam Report

Without access to more detailed data, this metric unfortunately remains rather crude – it is affected by learners who repeat grades or leave school to attend technical and vocational education training (TVET) colleges. Nonetheless, detailed [analysis](#) released by the DBE itself suggests that when these factors are considered, the real pass rate still hovered just above 50% for the past couple of years<sup>6</sup> – a far cry from the 70% plus pass rate touted by Minister Motshekga every year.

### Provincial pass rates

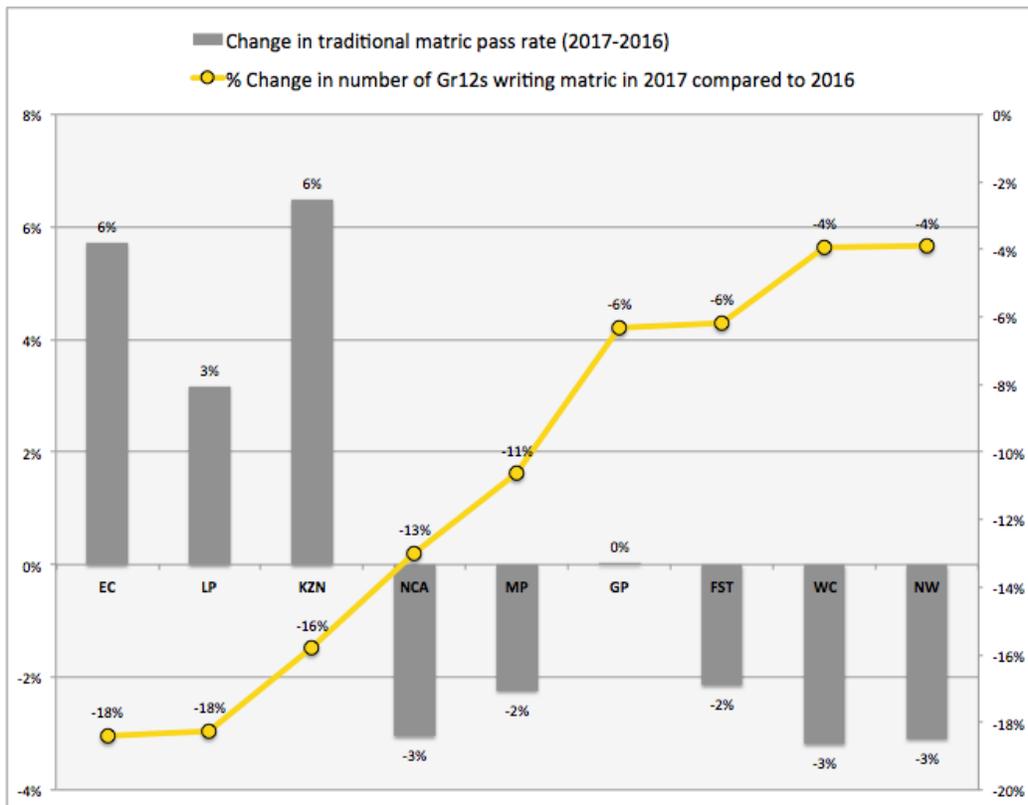
<sup>4</sup> Department of Basic Education. 2016. *Report on progress in the schooling sector against key learner performance and attainment indicators*. Pg. 3. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/Education%20Sector%20review%202015%20-%202016.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Department of Basic Education. 2018. *2017 National Senior Certificate Examination Report*. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2017%20NSC%20Examination%20Report.pdf?ver=2018-01-05-112628-360>

<sup>6</sup> Department of Basic Education, 2016. *Report on progress in the schooling sector against key learner performance and attainment indicators*. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/Education%20Sector%20review%202015%20-%202016.pdf>

It remains absurd that the DBE has insisted on ranking provinces in terms of matric pass rates each year. This annual announcement, based on the traditional pass rate, not only fails to consider learner dropout rates, it also ignores the immense contextual disparities between rural and urban provinces.

The provinces that reflected the largest improvements in their 2017 pass rates (Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Kwazulu-Natal), were also the provinces with the biggest decrease in learners who wrote the matric exams.<sup>7</sup> This points to a worrying practice that is commonly associated with high stakes testing: often referred to as ‘culling’ or ‘gate-keeping’. Teachers or principals sometimes hold learners back in Grade 11 or encourage them to take different subjects in order to improve pass rates.



Source: Nic Spaull<sup>8</sup>

It is encouraging that the DBE is exploring a new format of reporting known as an [Inclusive Basket of Criteria](#), which recognises the limitations of the traditional pass rate. The key indicators (per province) considered in this new metric together with their weighting are as follows:

<sup>7</sup> Spaull, N., 2018. Explaining-the-matric-results-in-7-gifs. Available at: <https://nicspaull.com/2018/01/05/explaining-the-matric-results-in-7-gifs/>

<sup>8</sup> Spaull, N., 2018. Explaining-the-matric-results-in-7-gifs. Available at: <https://nicspaull.com/2018/01/05/explaining-the-matric-results-in-7-gifs/>

- a) Overall pass percentage (35%)
- b) Mathematics pass percentage (10%)
- c) Physical Sciences pass percentage (10%)
- d) Bachelor attainment percentage (15%)
- e) Distinction percentage (10%)
- f) Mathematics participation rate (10%)
- g) Throughput rate (10%)

While this is a welcome step towards a greater focus on the quality of matric passes produced in a province, it is disappointing that the traditional pass rate has been allocated such a heavy weighting as opposed to the throughput rate, and that only science and mathematics achievements are considered. It is also disappointing that the DBE chose not to focus on this metric – not when last year’s results were announced or in the National Senior Certificate Examination Report published thereafter. *The DBE should include this data more expressly in its communication on the matric results.*

### **2018 matric exams include South African Sign Language as a Home Language, for the first time!**

A particularly important development in the 2018 matric exams is that for the first time learners were examined on SASL as a Home Language. This is a momentous occasion. We salute activists who have campaigned tirelessly to ensure that a more inclusive education becomes a reality, and all other stakeholders who were involved in this development. We also recognise this as a step forward in truly fulfilling the general aims of the South African [curriculum](#).

In March 2018, matric exam quality assurer, Umalusi, released a [report](#) on the implementation of SASL as a Home Language. It noted that there remains a great need for training teachers in SASL, an issue that was also highlighted to Parliament by [DeafSA](#).

In order to prepare for the final matric examinations for SASL-HL, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) conducted mock examinations across five provinces, in August 2018. The preliminary examinations revealed a few [challenges](#), that had to be addressed prior to learners sitting for their final matric exams.

That being said, Umalusi found that the DBE and Provincial Education Departments were largely ready to conduct these groundbreaking exams for SASL.

We now await the results with great anticipation. The roll-out of SASL as a Home Language subject is an important step towards realising the constitutional right of deaf learners, to a basic education. Much more work still needs to be done to truly include learners living with disabilities in our education system. It is non-negotiable that South Africa’s education system be inclusive of all learners.

### **Shifting inequalities in higher education**

As the focus turns towards what the future holds for the Class of 2018, the quality of basic education remains an important determinant of learners' future prospects. As we highlighted in [2017](#), patterns of university access, and university success, are strongly influenced by basic school outcomes – particularly whether learners obtain Bachelor passes. In the past, learners from quintile four and five schools have obtained the largest proportion of Bachelor passes, despite making up a smaller percentage of learners who wrote the matric exams. In both 2016 and 2017, learners from quintile one to three schools obtained just under half of the Bachelor passes, despite making up around two thirds of learners who wrote the exams.

*In analysing the 2018 matric results we should be looking to see greater shifts in the proportion of Bachelor passes obtained by learners from the poorest schools, particularly at a time when access to higher education is receiving renewed attention.*

Accessing higher education opportunities and graduating are a challenge. Some school leavers who qualify to enter tertiary institutions often cannot afford the fees; a Stellenbosch University study found that many students do not enter university immediately after matric.<sup>9</sup> In addition to battling for funding, students also have to struggle to secure a space at one of South Africa's higher education institutions. Yearly, we witness potential students waiting in long queues to register at universities, colleges and technikons; and too often, we hear of a stampede that has occurred at one of these institutions as students attempt to obtain placement.

While government has attempted to address fees as a barrier to higher education, its ad-hoc announcement of free higher education has come at a significant cost to basic education funding – funding for the Second Chance Programme, aimed at supporting young people who are repeating matric, was almost slashed by approximately R117 million over the medium-term.<sup>10</sup>

*Our government needs to find a sustainable solution to funding tertiary students from poor and working-class households, as well as those who fall within the 'missing-middle' – without compromising the basic education budget. The State should strengthening the basic education system by ensuring that it is sufficiently funded; to capacitate teachers, provide proper infrastructure, provide learner and teacher support material and so forth.*

Improving the quality of education provided to learners, particularly at the foundation phase, in South Africa's public schools is essential to ensuring that our youth can realise their aspirations.

### **Unemployment: the difficult reality for post-school youth**

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<sup>9</sup> Van Broekhuizen. H, Van der Berg. S and Hofmeyer. H, *Higher Education Access and Outcomes for the 2008 National Matric Cohort*. Stellenbosch University (2016). Available at: <https://www.ekon.sun.ac.za/wpapers/2016/wp162016>

<sup>10</sup> National Treasury, *Estimates of National Expenditure*. Vote 14 (2018). Available at: <http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2018/ene/Vote%2014%20Basic%20Education.pdf>

Educational qualifications are an important variable that increase the prospects for employment. According to [StatsSA](#) people who never obtained a matric certificate form the largest proportion of South Africa's unemployed – 56%. Those with a matric qualification comprise 35%, while less than 2% of those that are unemployed are graduates.<sup>11</sup>

[Youth unemployment](#) remains one of South Africa's most pressing problems, with millions of young people not working or studying. This is evidence of an ailing socio-political and economic climate in the country.

In the latter months of 2018, South Africa's unemployment figure reached a tragic 27,5%. The situation for young people is even more dire with over 30% of youth aged 15 to 24 not in employment, education or training (NEETs)<sup>12</sup> and almost 40% of young people aged 15 to 34 not working or studying.<sup>13</sup>

The NEETs figure for youth aged 15 to 24 has remained at around 30% since 2013, indicating that South Africa is making little headway in addressing this crisis. The highest number of NEETs aged 15 to 24 are new job entrants to the labour force, followed by discouraged job seekers.

On the one hand, employers complain that youth leave the education system without the requisite skills, an issue that disproportionately affects learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, South Africa's almost stagnant economic growth means the labour market is unable to absorb the number of young people entering it each year.

This situation, if left unaddressed, could lead to social instability and lost economic potential for the country. Most importantly, our government is letting down millions of talented young people.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Today's matric results announcement provides an opportunity to look beyond crude matric pass rates towards a more nuanced picture of the basic education system. Questions around throughput rates and whether class dynamics in results are shifting, should be at the forefront of conversations around these results, rather than meaningless comparisons of traditional national and provincial pass rates. The introduction of SASL-HL further opens up space for long-overdue conversations on inclusion in South African classrooms.

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<sup>11</sup> Statistics South Africa. 2018. Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS), Third Quarter of 2018. Available at: [http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page\\_id=1854&PPN=P0211&SCH=7330](http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1854&PPN=P0211&SCH=7330)

<sup>12</sup> Department of Higher Education and Training, 2018. *Fact Sheet on NEETs*. Available at: [http://www.dhet.gov.za/Planning%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation%20Coordination/WED%20Fact%20sheet%20on%20NEETs\\_Final\\_Version\\_29%20Aug%202018.pdf](http://www.dhet.gov.za/Planning%20Monitoring%20and%20Evaluation%20Coordination/WED%20Fact%20sheet%20on%20NEETs_Final_Version_29%20Aug%202018.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Statistics South Africa. 2018. *Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS), Third Quarter of 2018*. Available at: [http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page\\_id=1854&PPN=P0211&SCH=7330](http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1854&PPN=P0211&SCH=7330)

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Shankar. V, Cooper. A, and Koh. H, *Reducing Youth Unemployment in South Africa*, pg. 9. Available at: <https://youtheconomicopportunities.org/sites/default/files/uploads/resource/Reducing%20Youth%20Unemployment%20in%20South%20Africa.pdf>

This is also an opportunity to call on government to address its most urgent priority: South Africa's literacy crisis. As long as this is left unaddressed, the basic education system will continue to fail the majority of learners.

To those who do make it through the education system, government has a responsibility to provide real post-school opportunities and to support young people in accessing these. President Cyril Ramaphosa has reiterated the importance of this and must now start acting on his commitments.

The South African government must create spaces in which it can purposefully engage with the youth to understand how and where to support the aspirations of young people. To achieve this, government will need to look beyond existing and failing youth agencies and work within their various departments to create sustainable ways for young people to participate in and gain from the country's economy.

The time for compromising on the future of young people is over!

[ENDS]

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