

# Halos and Horns: Reliving Constructions of Matric Performance in the South African Education System

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The question I have been asked to address is how Matric is performing. The seeming simplicity of this question belies its complexity. It raises myriad questions: Performing what? When? Where? For whom? How does one determine the performance of Matric? Chisholm (2004) argues that the analytical tools, quality and disaggregation of information are rarely subject to authentic analysis. The main tool that lends itself quite easily to being used to measure the performance of Matric is the examination.

Assessment in South Africa has been dominated by the Senior Certificate, or Matric as it is popularly known (Loock & Grobler, 2005; Lubisi & Murphy, 2002). The debate about Matric is an old one and it always centres around the issues of quality and standards (Lolwana, 2004; Chisholm, 2004).

The concept of quality in education refers, *inter alia*, to factors such as learners' achievements, teaching approaches and the nature (physical, cultural and social) of the school. Quality in the classroom also raises issues such as the aims, goals and means of teachers and learners. Quality, however, is one of those terms that are not easy to measure or define. 'Quality teaching and learning', 'quality assurance' and 'total quality management' are all themes that focus the attention and draw the criticism of policy makers, administrators and practitioners across the international educational arena. No one is against quality; everyone wants to be assured that they will obtain it. But what is quality and how do we know when we have found it or failed to achieve it? How are we to assess it and what measures need to be introduced to promote it? Can the introduction of a new curriculum, for example, improve quality in our schools? These are all complex questions.

In South Africa, public examination results are the main performance indicators of schools. Schools with the highest number of passes are reported in the media. While this practice may be seen to be motivating, teaching for examinations (i.e. teaching the syllabus only) may deny learners the opportunity to access the breadth of knowledge associated with education. This is most often the case with traditional, content-based curricula where memorizing knowledge for examination purposes is emphasized, instead of acquiring skills and focusing on processes. In this regard, the teacher remains the key

person who can maintain efficiency and effectiveness while facilitating the development tasks related to examinations.

Assessment has become one of the most significant areas of interest in educational policy development worldwide. This is true in emergent educational systems such as ours as well as in the context of government interventions in established systems. The importance of assessment for influencing teaching and curricula has not been lost on governments. Politicians are increasingly aware that what is taught, and how, can be indirectly assessed through the control of 'high stakes' assessment programmes (Filer, 2000).

Educational assessment has thus become a highly contested area, as it is the focus of complex political, economic and cultural expectations for change. In the context of the growing social significance of assessment, however, policy, public debate and the development of practice predominantly focus on the technical means by which policy is delivered. Notwithstanding the growing significance of assessment in the social structuring of societies, debate rarely addresses more fundamental issues concerning the social functions and outcomes of assessment.

Filer (2000) distinguishes between technical and sociological discourses of assessment. A technical discourse of assessment is one in which required ends—for example, practices of grading, comparing and selecting individuals or schools on the basis of test scores—are not in dispute. It is, rather a discourse concerning the means whereby given ends can be achieved as fairly and objectively as possible. Within such a discourse, therefore, technicalities concerned with test validity and reliability, criterion and norm referencing, and so on, will prevail. Such a discourse is thus about maintaining and improving confidence in systems of assessment and results; thus ultimately legitimizing the uses to which they are put. A sociological discourse of assessment, on the other hand, presents insights into the fact that, as well as having educational purposes, assessment fulfils a range of political and social functions within modern societies. These wider functions are concerned with social differentiation and reproduction, social control and the legitimizing of particular forms of knowledge and culture of socially powerful groups. This discourse is particularly concerned with the social impact of assessment and the perpetuation of educational and social disparity and its cumulative effects in shaping ways in which individuals and groups in society come to be seen and to see themselves.

The performance of Matric has been constructed and cast in different guises. Sometimes it is constructed as pass rates, complete with the number of endorsements and school leaving passes, male versus female, black versus white, English First Language versus English Second Language candidates, privileged versus underprivileged or disadvantaged, urban versus rural, and all the other contrasts and antinomies one can conjure. It is also constructed as the level of difficulty of the various examination question papers. In other instances the focus is on the processes of resulting, and more specifically the statistical moderation of, assessment scores. This paper will now proceed to consider these various constructions of Matric performance.

## **2. MATRIC PERFORMANCE AS HISTORICAL RESILIENCE**

Cast in this mode, Matric is widely revered by many who belonged to advantaged departments of education under apartheid. To some extent, even those who came from disadvantaged systems place a very high value on the Matric. Its currency accrues from its long history and legitimation as the most important qualification in the eyes of the public. Arguments about Matric having built its reputation and legitimacy over the years are passed as evidence of its good performance. Matric history is very often chronicled in a laudatory manner that masks its uses over the years, including serving the purposes of the apartheid government. Lolwana (2004) identifies three distinct phases in the quality assurance of Matric: the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) era, the South African Certification Council (SAFCERT) era, and the emerging Umalusi era.

The Joint Matriculation Board exercised quality control through the moderation of question papers, moderation of marking, standardization of examination results, annual reviews of the right of any department to run the Matric examination, and control of school syllabi. The JMB's quality control of Matric relied heavily on the standardization of examination results. From 1921 to 1953 the JMB granted permission to various provincial departments of education to run Matric examinations and thus become examination bodies. However, the JMB kept a tight rein on these examinations to ensure that they were of a comparable standard to those set by the JMB itself. This was done mainly through a statistical process of applying an obligatory standard distribution curve per subject to adjust the marks to a standard score before the comparative process could be applied. Even then, the statistical moderation of examination results was highly contested (Trumpelmann, 1991).

The JMB ceased to exist in 1992. Matric was controlled by the Matriculation Board, which was a sub-committee of the Committee of University Principals (CUP), now called the South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA). The South African Certification Council was established in 1986, and until 2002 it took over the function of quality assuring Matric. Contrary to popular belief that all was well within both the JMB and SAFCERT, Lolwana (2004, p 6) observes that:

It is alleged that SAFCERT applied its standard keeping function discriminately to the various examining bodies. Certain examining bodies were allowed to operate unchecked while others were closely monitored. Given the low levels of provisioning in the homelands and the ex-DET and the resultant poor performance in these systems, SAFCERT was compelled to upwardly adjust raw scores in excess of accepted practice so as to present a more favourable picture of performance in these systems. Similarly, in propping up systems of the apartheid government, the Statistics Committee of the JMB was very lenient towards administrations such as the Transkei. Their intention was to give the impression that these homelands were working.

SAFCERT was transformed at the end of 2002 and replaced by the Council for General and Further Education and Training, known as Umalusi. Umalusi largely carries on and

attempts to improve the quality assurance regime it has inherited from the JMB and SAFCERT. Umalusi has a bigger mandate than its two predecessors, however. Its role is to maintain the integrity of and confidence in the system. The quality assurance measures used by Umalusi to ensure the validity, reliability and fairness of the Senior Certificate Examination include moderating question papers, moderating marking, monitoring the conduct of the exam, moderating continuous assessment and standardizing marks. In conducting the research into the standard of the Senior Certificate Examination, Umalusi sought to understand whether the quality assurance measures mentioned above were in fact performing the function they are meant to perform.

### **3. MATRIC PERFORMANCE AS PASS RATES**

Bott (2005) observes that the Senior Certificate results are difficult to compare over the period 1990 to 2004. Racially classified examinations continued until 1996 when non-racial provincial examinations were introduced and, with this, new norms for determining the performance of learners had to be developed for each province as well as for the national subjects. The pass rate in 1991 was 53%, showing a slight improvement to 54% in 1996 and dropping sharply to 49% in 1998. Thereafter, results improved steadily to a high of 69% in 2002, 73% in 2003 and 71% in 2004. Chisholm (2004) observes that an analysis of trends rather than rates since 1996 does show that while the total number of candidates has declined, both the number passing and the number with exemption have risen.

Even as the Department of Education celebrated the improved pass rates and patted itself on the back for this great achievement in the democratization of education in South Africa (Ndhlovu, 2004), serious doubts were expressed about the extent to which they reflect an actual improvement in the performance and quality of candidates. Jansen (2004) fired the first salvo by charging that the Senior Certificate Examination has become easier. Muller (2004) argues that learner performance at all levels of the system remains extremely poor. He argues that current assessment is not telling the public what it ought to know. Foxcroft (2004) observes that Matric has become a very unreliable predictor of success at tertiary level. The improvement in pass rates was ascribed to other factors such as the fact that many more learners are writing subjects on Standard Grade rather than Higher Grade, as the research conducted by Umalusi (2004) revealed. Sceptics have added that practices like the 'culling' of learners at Grade 11, mark adjustments for second-language speakers who offer African languages as their first language, a prevalence of upward rather than downward adjustments of marks during the standardization process have resulted in improved pass rates (Fleisch, 2003).

Considered from the realm of pass rates, therefore, Matric is performing very well indeed, but there are loud voices of dissent.

Regardless of the ongoing annual discourse of derision, statistical realities or legitimacy of comparison from year to year, South Africans continue to want to use Matric to pronounce on how well its school leavers are doing and how well the society is doing.

## **4. PERFORMANCE AS THE CONCEPTUAL DEMAND OF EXAMINATION QUESTION PAPERS**

Sometimes Matric performance is judged by the level of difficulty in examination question papers—the more difficult the question papers are, the higher the standard of the examination is seen to be. Umalusi's research revealed some disturbing findings in this regard. The level of conceptual demand in the majority of subjects—English First Language, English Second Language, Biology and Mathematics—was found to be rather low. Subject specialist teams in all four subjects found a dearth of items requiring the deployment of higher-order thinking skills. This was the case in both Higher and Standard Grades.

The English Second Language subject evaluation team highlighted the crucial role played by English in the South African education system as both a target and a vehicle for learning. They argued that candidates would be required to show that they can operate in English in a competent manner when using it in their other subjects.

... the content of the English Second/Additional Language curriculum, together with assessment practices at the Senior Certificate level for this subject, are singularly inappropriate for preparing students to study their other subjects. More specifically, the low levels of cognitive demand at which these practices are pitched are in fact counterproductive to developing the conceptual language and skills needed for higher levels of learning (Umalusi Report, 2004: 47).

In 1998 the then Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, appointed a research team to investigate the language issue, assuming that learners who write the Senior Certificate examination in a language that is not their mother tongue are seriously disadvantaged. The research team concluded that language was a factor contributing to poor performance by such learners. The team also found that the learners were further disadvantaged by the syllabi of the African languages, which did not encourage the use of higher-order thinking skills.

SAFCERT decided in 1999, as part of its responsibility to ensure fairness in the Senior Certificate Examination, to apply a compensatory measure for learners whose first language was neither English nor Afrikaans and who offered an African language as their first language. A compensation of 5% was awarded to such learners for their non-language subjects, based on the mark they had obtained in the examination. This was understood to be an interim measure until the issue of upgrading the teaching and learning of English Second/Additional Language has been addressed.

In 2004 Umalusi evaluated the compensation practice. The findings confirmed the low levels of achievement by compensation candidates compared to the other candidates. The statistical analysis seemed to indicate that the competency level of the compensation candidates in the second language has not improved in the last seven years.

## **5. PERFORMANCE AS HISTORICAL NORMS**

A number of experts in education have expressed scepticism about the standardization process (Bott, 2005; Muller, 2004; Fleisch, 2003). They argue that this process is used to adjust marks upwards with the aim of achieving improved pass rates. Standardisation is the process whereby the results of an examination are compared with established norms and standards and adjusted if necessary. The process is premised on the probability that candidates with equal ability will obtain equivalent results if writing different question papers under different circumstances (Loock & Grobler, 2005).

Umalusi (2004) evaluated the statistical moderation of the Senior Certificate Examination. The evaluation was conducted independently by two specialists who have extensive experience in the process. They produced two independent reports which corroborated each other. Their evaluation found that:

For 1996 and subsequent years the predominant adjustments performed at the statistical moderation meetings were upwards, not infrequently by a maximum of 10% allowed. However, the situation has improved since 2002. Now both upward and downward adjustments are made, and in many cases raw marks are accepted (Umalusi, 2004, p43).

The evaluation by Umalusi showed, therefore, that the upward adjustments predominant in the earlier years of democracy were more a symptom of emerging norms rather than a conscious effort to raise marks.

1996 was the first year that national examination papers were introduced. There were no norms for these national examinations to assist in the standardisation process. A new approach had to be introduced in the interim until such norms were established. This opened room for bargaining on the results on the basis of other factors outside the statistical norms. The system has, however, stabilised and the norms entrenched.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The issue of Matric performance is a complex one. It can be approached from a multiplicity of perspectives. The answer is never cut and dried. The various standpoints from which Matric performance can be considered testifies to this fact. There are a number of issues emanating from the research conducted by Umalusi which the new National Senior Certificate will have to battle with. These include:

1. the issue of standard setting;
2. the issue of differentiation;
3. levels of cognitive demand;
4. the articulation and elaboration of outcomes, curriculum and assessment standards; and
5. the whole issue of quality assurance of the qualification.

All these issues need to be addressed before the new qualification is awarded in 2008. This would necessitate the rigorous review of quality assurance processes used by Umalusi to quality assure assessment leading to the award of the National Senior Certificate.

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