

For immediate release:

15 October 2021

Umalusi approves the writing of the 2021 end-of-year national examinations

Umalusi, the Quality Council for General and Further Education and Training, has granted approval to private and public assessment bodies to administer the 2021 end-of-year national examinations for the National Senior Certificate (NSC). Similar to 2020, the basic education sector has continued to experience the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, in collaboration with assessment bodies, Umalusi has managed to fulfil its quality assurance mandate by using digital platforms to do some of its work. The continued reality of COVID-19 has also resulted in the loss of valuable teaching and learning time in most parts of the country. This has undoubtedly put tremendous strain on the entire education system. Nevertheless, with proper planning and meticulous execution, the challenges presented by COVID-19 are not insurmountable.

Umalusi conducts quality assurance of assessment to ensure that assessment leading to the award of certificates in schools, adult education centres and technical and vocational education and training colleges is of the required standard. This is in order to ensure that the certificates issued by Umalusi are credible. To this end, the Council has conducted a thorough assessment of the readiness of the basic education system to manage and conduct the 2021 national examinations. Therefore, despite identified shortcomings, the Council is generally satisfied that all assessment bodies are ready to undertake this massive task despite COVID-19.

In the past few months, public and independent assessment bodies have worked hard to ensure that their examination systems comply with Umalusi's policy and directives regarding the administration, management and conduct of NSC examinations. As a Quality Council, Umalusi has fulfilled its role in monitoring and verifying the work of the following assessment bodies - Department of Basic Education (DBE), Independent Examinations Board (IEB), and the South African Comprehensive Assessment Institute (SACAI).

The registration of DBE candidates for the 2021 national examinations has been successfully completed by all provinces, and the national registration outlook as provided by DBE is as follows (as at 30 September 2021):

NSC (Nov 2021)	
Full-Time	735 677
Part-Time	162 109
Grand Total	897 786

DBE's NSC examinations will be written at approximately 11 308 examination centres across the country and marking will be conducted at about 193 marking centres. IEB has registered 13 894 candidates for the November 2021 national examinations compared to 13 201 in 2020 who will be writing at 237 examination centres across the country. SACAI has registered 4 361 part-time NSC candidates who will write at 72 centres across the country.

This year, Umalusi has continued to implement a Risk Management Based (RMB) approach as its strategy to evaluate the level of preparedness of assessment bodies to conduct the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations. The rationale behind the use of the strategy was to enable Umalusi to identify risks that may compromise the delivery of credible examinations on time and advise the affected assessment bodies accordingly.

As part of the RMB approach, Umalusi focuses on the following eight areas to fulfil its quality assurance of assessment mandate: management, registration of candidates and examination centres, school-based assessment, printing, packaging and distribution of question papers, conduct of examinations, marker selection and appointment of marking personnel, systems for the capturing of marks and management of examination irregularities.

As the assessment body with the largest cohort of candidates, the findings of the quality assurance process for DBE can be summarised as follows:

- a. The filling of vacancies remains a systemic challenge and the current budget cuts further exacerbated the challenge, however, the Provincial Education Departments (PEDs) put measures in place to ensure that examination deliverables are not compromised.
- b. Audits of examination centres was conducted across PED, however, the responsibility was delegated to the districts for management and reporting. This process was completed.
- c. For 2021, the DBE has put measures in place for the release and collection of question paper consignments prior to the commencement of printing. This required the PEDs to conduct and put together a risk assessment document and mitigating strategies for printing, packaging, storage and distribution.
- d. The question papers for 2020 November examinations have been moderated and were approved on time and consignments for their printing were also managed successfully by the DBE.
- e. The standardised national protocols on health and safety for monitoring of the writing of examinations have been developed and strict adherence to these protocols will be monitored across provinces, districts, circuits and examination centres.
- f. Marker shortages were reported in North-West, Eastern Cape, Western Cape and Northern Cape. As a result, these PED have embarked on second recruitment drives to address the shortages.

Umalusi appreciates the effort made by all assessment bodies in putting systems in place to ensure that the integrity of national examinations is not compromised despite limitations imposed by COVID-19. The PEDs also continue to introduce innovative ideas to address identified gaps in the system and this augurs well for the improvement of the system in general.

When addressing the media, the CEO of Umalusi, Dr Mafu Rakometsi, issued a stern warning to all stakeholders regarding incidents of cheating that were reported last year: "Once again, as we have done in the past, and in light of what transpired in 2020, Umalusi wishes to issue a stern warning to all learners and teachers to refrain from all forms of cheating, including paper leakages. We berate and condemn this criminal practice with the contempt it deserves. Cheating compromises the integrity of our

national examination system, which we are mandated to jealously protect as a Quality Council.”

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