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What the 2015 Matric results mean for Universities?

By Professor Suellen Shay

Listening to the Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga's annual report on the matric results is always a case of listening to both what is said and more importantly what is not said. Overall the Minister gives a sober account for the 2015 results, in particular the significant drop in pass rate from 75% in 2014 to 70% in 2015. The specific interventions to support 'progressed learners' are to be commended. These are grade 11 learners who were promoted to matric even though their results did not qualify them to progress. Nearly 40% of them passed and not an insignificant number gained Bachelor passes and distinctions. This suggests that the investment has been worthwhile as many of these students were given the opportunity to show their potential.

From the point of view of the higher education sector, we are interested in what the results tell us about the extent to which the 2015 matriculants are prepared for university study. For this, one needs to look a little more carefully. Admissions into and preparedness for university in South Africa can be measured using two indicators. One is the National Senior Certificate (NSC), the other is the National Benchmark Tests (NBT) taken by nearly 80,000 university applicants across the country. Together these tests offer complementary data for universities' admissions decisions. The NSC is an indicator of learners' past school achievement on a range of subjects. The NBT is an indicator of likely future performance against more general competencies, such as Academic Literacy, Quantitative Literacy and Mathematics.

In relation to the NSC, while not all university programmes require Maths and Science, these subjects are good indicators of university preparedness and in fact essential for entry into programmes such as Science, Commerce, Engineering and Health Science and some specializations in the Social Sciences. What the Minister tells us in her speech is that the number of passes in these key subjects has increased between 2014 and 2015. She qualifies this however by noting that the percentage pass is down. The detail of this in the technical report tables is interesting and important. First of all, it is important to note that the number of enrolments for these subjects has increased, but the overall percentage pass had dropped. 33% of learners in both 2014 and 2015 wrote Mathematics and 24% of learners wrote Physical Science. (Compare this to an increase from 46% to 49% of learners writing Mathematics Literacy.) In terms of performance while more learners passed in each of these subjects (see Table 13.2.3 Technical Report 2015), the percentage of passes for Mathematics is down in 2015 from 2014. In 2015 49% scored 30% and above, compared to 53% who scored the same in 2014. In short, of the 33% of learners who wrote Mathematics, only half of those scored above 30% which constitutes a pass. For Physical Science, the pattern is

similar. Of the approximately 25% who wrote the subject, 59% scored 30% and above, down from 61% in 2014. Overall these results are of concern for learners who want to go to university and study a science-based programme.

The NBT results for the 2015 writers provide an equally sobering picture of performance in these key competency areas. Writers of NBT are scored against three benchmarks: basic, intermediate and proficient. 'Basic' predicts that students will face serious challenges and require extensive and long term support. 'Intermediate' predicts that students will face some challenges and require appropriate support. 'Proficient' predicts that students will be able to cope with a regular programme of study. (These benchmarks are set by disciplinary experts around the country representing most of SA's universities). The profile for the 2015 NBT writers of Mathematics indicates that 45% of writers scored 'basic'. This means that they will have serious challenges with university level Mathematics. Only 10% scored 'proficient' meaning that they would be expected to cope with regular mainstream provision. This provides strong evidence that, despite all the achievements of the DBE, the overwhelming majority of our matriculants are not prepared for university level study in the science-based fields. And these are, as the Minister reminded us, 'the best of the best'. (Minister's speech 5-1-16)

In partnership with the DBE in its efforts to produce more university-ready learners, universities need to ask themselves whether *they* are prepared for the incoming matriculants. Both the NSC and the NBT data provide a compelling body of evidence for revisiting our assumptions about entry level readiness. This requires a hard and critical look at our undergraduate curriculum. The University of Johannesburg is preparing to enroll 10,000 new students (headlines today of eNCA). To what extent do they have in place the necessary Maths and Science curriculum at entry level to cater for the diversity of educational preparedness of those 10,000 students? Some will need no support, the majority will need extensive support. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training statistics, HE's retention rate is improving (DHET HE Summit, Appendix 3). But retention is only good news when accompanied by completion. As yet no convincing case can be made for a significant improving trend in overall completion rates (Scott, 2015). The strides in equity of access have not been matched by equity of outcomes. Until such time as there is significant reform of SA's undergraduate curriculum, with a particular focus on Mathematics and Science, universities will remain unprepared for the 'best of the best' that South Africa's schooling system has to offer.

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