

Highs and lows - the class of 2020

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2020 was a tough year for education. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the matric results that the Department of Basic Education released earlier this week. They show a dip of 5.1% as the pass rate fell to 76.2%. While not surprising considering the serious and direct impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on education, what is worrying is that the number of learners who are passing grade 12 with bachelor passes remains low at just 36.5%. More significantly, that number is not enough to support the country's dire skills shortage as the majority of those who do achieve bachelor passes do not perform adequately in 'gateway' subjects like mathematics to truly aid the country's economic growth and development by entering occupations of high demand, says the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (Saica).

Matrics around the country are celebrating their success following the Department of Basic Education's release of the 2020 NSC and IEB matric results. Yet, despite their individual success, serious issues remain with the quality of academic outcomes, warns Saica's executive director for nation building, Chantyl Mulder.

One glaring omission in the Department of Basic Education's annual matric results release is the fact that it does not highlight how bad the state of mathematics in our country really is. For this, you must delve into the reports on the department's website and draw your own conclusions. And sadly, those conclusions paint a bleak picture.

The poor state of maths: a two-way affair

"In order to truly understand the state of mathematics in South Africa, one cannot look at the pass rate alone. One must begin by analysing the number of learners who wrote the subject at the NSC level in the first place," says Mulder. For 2020, that number is 233,315 –which equates to just slightly more than 40% of the cohort.

"The second measure is performance: only 53.8% of the pupils who wrote the exam passed it. This pass rate is down from 54.6% in 2019. This number is even more shocking when you recall that the minimum pass mark is just 30%. Indeed, of all the maths candidates only 3.2% (7,424) achieved a distinction (a score of more than 80%). And while this is 1.2% more than last year, these low numbers still do not merit much excitement," laments Mulder.

Mathematics performance matters for university entrance. Without it, school leavers are not eligible for programmes at university in scarce-skills careers such as the sciences, engineering or chartered accountancy. This meant that despite passing this critical subject, the door of opportunity in these fields remains closed to the majority of our learners. This, sadly, has a knock on effect by increasing inequality for both the individuals and the country at large.

Yet, what does the future for those who do achieve a bachelor pass look like?

Covid-19's effect on education cannot be understated



Chantyl Mulder

What is heartening in the NSC results is the fact that those who passed did so under some of the most difficult circumstances imaginable. Not only did the virus keep more than 90% of all learners out of school for almost a year, but many matric learners were also unable to make a smooth transition to online teaching and learning as schools could not deploy an online teaching model, either because the school or the majority of the pupils did not have adequate resources. For others, those attending rural schools in particular, further delays were experienced in the reopening of schools after the initial hard lockdown due to a lack of personal protective equipment and proper ablution facilities.

“The class for 2020 has illustrated real guts and emotional resilience,” exclaims Mulder. “And now it is up to us to help them bridge the existing inequalities gap in order to be successful at a tertiary level.”

“In any given year, anyone going to university faces a myriad of challenges as they navigate their new environment. For those who rely on bursaries because they do not have the financial means to study, those challenges can be 10- even 20-fold greater. Funded learners have to figure out how to manage their finances, navigate new social situations, develop their self-confidence, continue to get good grades and much more, all without the support system they have in their own hometown. And now, as a result of the pandemic, they also have to cope with the manner in which lesson delivery has changed, student accommodation rules have altered and socialisation on campus has changed.”

Indeed, says Mulder: “Our research has shown that no matter how academically capable a student is, students who need funding in order to go to university do not fare well in their higher education studies without support being provided to them across all areas including academic and non-academic support. In other words, funding alone is not sufficient. Issues such as accommodation, food security, social and psychological support are just as critical in ensuring that these students are able to cope with the pace of tertiary education. This is something Saica provides all the students on its Thuthuka Bursary by providing dedicated programme managers as well as psycho-social support programmes for students over and above funding their studies.”

“Bridging the shortcomings in our education system takes the collaboration and support of all the role players in the broader national economy. Now more than ever, we need programmes that pool together our knowledge and skills in order to address the problems relating to quality education and skills development in our country,” Mulder concludes.

About Saica

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Chartered accountants are highly valued for their versatile skill set and creative lateral thinking, that's why the top 100 global brands all employ chartered accountants*.

*Source: CAW, 2020 – Interbrand, Best Global Brands 2019

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