

Source: SUNDAY ARGUS

Date: 31-Dec-2006

Topic: 25

Ref No: 6264



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ID: 03428704-01 Source Page: 10

'Education must go beyond just getting a certificate'

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OBTAINING a matric qualification has become almost meaningless, and under-graduate degrees are heading for a similar fate.

Experts believe most employers require skilled personnel with at least one post-graduate degree to their names.

"I don't know how any young person in the 21st century can leave high school and expect to get a job anywhere," says Professor Jonathan Jansen, dean of the faculty of education at the University of Pretoria.

Jansen remembers that when the older generations left school with what was then called a Junior Certificate, that qualification still held some currency. The same applied to the Senior Certificate qualification until recently.

"Now a young person cannot get a job at any level of skill without post-matric training, whether it is at a technical college or a university. The economic value of a matric, even with an endorsement, is worth zilch. There are no skills embedded in matric unless the person does post-matric training, otherwise it is pretty much meaningless."

But, said Jansen, neither schools nor universities had as part of their curriculums the teaching of other values

needed in the workplace, including team work, innovative and independent thinking, and the value of analysis.

He did not expect the present situation to improve soon, pointing out the new school curriculum said all the right things about what children

should learn, while teachers buckling under heavy administrative workloads were mostly interested in only getting children to pass.

Wits University registrar Derek Swemmer said a distinction needed to be drawn between school-leaving and matric, as a matric qualification meant the person had obtained a university entrance exemption. This privilege was

only obtained by very few, and the majority of young people were left with no other option but to seek employment.

Swemmer said while some were able to access the Further Education and Training courses offered by government, others did not have that luxury.

Swemmer said obtaining a general degree did not necessarily mean the person was unable to find employment, as many companies were looking for a mix - people who have a broader basis of education and later specialised.

On whether matriculants were able to cope with the transition to tertiary study, Swemmer said this level of prepared-

ness varied according to the kind of school education received, including being taught how to think independently. Most schools did not offer this kind of education. However, most South African universities had made provisions to help these students bridge the gap.

Swemmer said what was coming out of schools was unfortunately not the quality one would expect. Compensatory measures being taken in some provinces to ensure better pass rates were not neces-

sarily advantageous to the pupil. While there were those who were able to adapt and cope with the realities of life after school, South Africa's primary and secondary school had quite a long way to go.

"There is no quick fix," said Swemmer, adding that other countries that had embarked on correcting their education systems to produce the highly skilled and qualified people they now had had done so over decades. "It requires a rethink of primary and secondary education in the country."

The National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (Naptosa) believes the main problem is delivery of quality teaching across the education and training system.

"Learner performance in the matric exam is but one indicator of quality. In this regard it is difficult to determine if there has indeed been improvements or not if the performance in the adjusted (final) scores are compared year on year. The only way to see whether there has been an improvement is to compare performances in respect of the raw (unadjusted) scores across three or four years," said Naptosa president Dave Balt.

Balt said the fact that this year's matric exams were more difficult, resulting in fewer distinctions and exemptions, showed the system had changed to one focused on quality rather than quantity.

But, he believed, the classes of 2006 and 2007 would not be as well equipped for employ-

ment as one would like. "These two groupings have been through a number of curriculum changes that have disadvantaged them. We anticipate a further drop in the pass rate in 2008 because that curriculum is far more demanding... and directed at the global village... and therefore the young people will be far more employable."

Thulas Nxesi, South African Democratic Teachers' Union general secretary, said one needed to question whether those matriculants who obtained exemptions were up to scratch, and whether there was much difference between the youth who had passed by one point and one that had failed by 1%.