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# Matric quick-fixes miss the mark

Short-term measures must not be allowed to substitute for the changes the education system really needs, writes JONATHAN D JANSEN

**A**NYONE with doubts about the politicisation of the "matric" examinations should reflect soberly on two media events this past week. The SABC, on its *Morning Live* show, offered the Minister of Education a series of heart-warming questions via its presenter, one of which was: "Minister Asmal, this year the matric examinations went without a glitch. Who would you like to compliment?" The minister, ever-smiling, lapped up this servile pandering by the public broadcaster with relish.

Die Burger, in the context of the official announcement of the results, posed its question through a young journalist, who asked Asmal for a response to criticism that the exam results might be a reflection of electioneering gimmicks.

She was torn to shreds. The non-smiling minister berated the young woman for daring to pose the question, challenging her commitment to the new government and instructing her on the role played by Die Burger in supporting the previous government.

She had spoiled the party by making the fatal error of assuming that, in our democracy, mildly critical questions by the media to government officials would receive serious technical commentary rather than vicious attacks on her personal integrity and political commitment.

This sensitivity on display by a senior government official is only partly a consequence of an impulsive character that responds personally to any hint of critical and independent thinking. It is also a result of a public examination argument that the minister knows rests on very shaky foundations.

If one took the matriculation examinations at face value (which would be dangerous in the extreme), there are serious questions that remain about the participation and performance of the very pupils who Asmal's Department of Education pretends to serve.

First, more than a quarter of the pupils who wrote the examination actually failed — that means 117 604 students had their hopes dashed in this very public display of performance.

Second, in critical subjects which are more likely to reflect the analytical capacity of our young people, more than two-thirds of pupils failed math-

ematics in the higher grade and about 50% failed physical science in the higher grade. In Limpopo, which achieved a 70% pass rate, more than 55% of pupils actually failed mathematics.

Third, and this is an unpleasant racial reality, if one could remove white, privileged pupils from the pooled results, the national averages would look so dismal as to send ambitious politicians into a 2004 electioneering freefall.

Is it not interesting that a government that insists on retaining the categorisation of people by race — ostensibly to track equity gains and losses — is the same one that abolishes the capturing of examination data by the same measure?

Fourth, where did all the pupils go?

***There is a strong and growing perception that the standard of performance required in the matriculation examination is lower than before***

Surely the political alarm bells should be ringing when 70 000 fewer pupils wrote "matric" in 2003 than five years ago?

What happened to the near-17 000 pupils who registered for the examination and did not show up? And who carries responsibility for the fact that 164 816 pupils in Grade 11 did not even show up in Grade 12? Where did these Grade 11 pupils go?

But it is not possible to take these examination results at face value. There is a strong and growing perception in the public mind that the standard of performance required in the matriculation examination is lower than before. The fact that a pass rate can grow consistently over a long period, that it can grow by almost 25% over five years, and that in 2003 every province showed an upward increase, raises questions.

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Two groups of pupils benefit from a lowering of performance standards.

At the lower end of the performance spectrum, thousands more pupils are just about falling over the minimum passing line.

At the upper end, more pupils are now participating in a meaningless (but insightful) ritual of taking up to 20 subjects for matriculation purposes, and achieving distinctions in almost every one of them.

One university claims that 60% of its first-year class now has students with A-average passes from "matric".

But the behaviour of the high achievers should attract little attention in comparison with the meaningless matric certificates of the poor performers.

It is a soul-destroying exercise to scan the results of the Western Cape, for example, and observe that in the former white and still-privileged schools, almost every pupil passes with endorsement, several with "merit" and a visible number with overall distinctions.

Across the railway tracks, in the surrounding township schools, pupils also pass — but each and every one passes with the same basic minimum "pass without endorsement".

So the minister is correct: in percentage terms, more pupils are passing but what the public is not told is that more pupils are passing poorly than ever before — for two reasons.

The first is that schools are under enormous pressure to perform and, as studies in the US and the UK have shown, when schools respond to external pressure they act to optimise their results — in plain English, they take short cuts.

I have pointed out before that these short cuts include the mass migration (if not coercion) of pupils onto the standard grade and the holding back of pupils in Grade 11 when schools judge that such pupils might fail and mess up the averages in Grade 12.

The second reason for more pupils passing (albeit poorly) is that marks are no longer awarded strictly on examination performance. Pupils receive marks for writing in a second language other than English and Afrikaans, and they receive up to a maximum of 25% of their marks before they even write the final examination.

The latter device, called continuous assessment, is in principle a good thing — awarding pupils for steady performance throughout the year.

But the government does not have a reliable and valid protocol in place to ensure that such marks are standardised across the national education system. To put it bluntly, many schools will extract maximum gain from the opportunity to rate their own pupils.

And then there is the vexed problem of moderation: the internal adjustment of marks. This again is standard practice in a norm-reference assessment system. But until the mechanisms and

applications of moderation are made public, and every citizen knows why, how and to what degree these marks are adjusted in specific examinations, there will always be the perception that the process is vulnerable to political pressure and manipulation.

It might be that a more authentic reflection of the state of the education system is the international and comparative tests of pupil achievement, in which South Africa consistently performs worse than other Third World countries.

These tests — such as the Third International Mathematics and Science

Study — are set internationally for grades lower down in the education system, and are therefore exempt from the external pressures and adjustments that have made the "matric" examination the kind of political circus that it has become.

Some of the national and provincial assessments conducted in primary grades show exactly the same thing: younger learners are failing in the basics. Miraculously, one year of "matric" and learners pass in record numbers.

South Africa deserves better. Black learners, in particular, deserve better. The public should not allow short-

term, unsustainable and quick-fix measures to substitute for the kind of "deep changes" required in the education system.

We should aspire towards a system in which every pupil has a textbook for each subject, every school has competent teachers, every institution has access to electricity and toilet facilities, and every pupil passes well enough to compete in the labour market — and well enough to complete a first degree. Such changes take time.

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