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Failure by any name is just as sour

The latest Kader Asmal education plan targets discrimination – but can education authorities provide the back-up to make it work, asks
Prof Jonathan Jansen, Dean of Education at the University of Pretoria

ON THE face of it, the proposals for the new Further Education and Training Certificate, to replace the matriculation examination, suggest cause for optimism. The differentiation between higher grade and standard grade subject performance will fall away, ending a system that was designed to accommodate mediocrity in education performance.

Large numbers of pupils continued to be pushed into the standard grade – ostensibly because of capability, when individual performance was more likely to be a consequence of under-prepared teachers and under-resourced classrooms. In the process, school results looked good, provincial results looked

good, and the politicians smiled – forgetting that “standard grade” actually meant a lowering of, yes, standards.

Furthermore, the prominent place to be assigned to mathematics in the school curriculum is to be applauded. It should be unthinkable that an emerging economy does not place mathematics at the centre of all learning at school level and, I would argue, even in higher education studies.

And the removal of the allocation of pass symbols (such as A and B) will redress a system that really did little more than affirm historical advantage among those young people who had mastered the rules of performance in an otherwise mediocre education system.

But, on closer examination, it is important that the public withholds applause. First, it is not at all clear whether the

end of higher grade/standard grade differentiation will not show up in another form of differentiation – one that excludes pupils from the university-specified pathway in the Further Education and Training Certificate and places them in more vocationally oriented pathways.

Second, it is also not clear what exactly the content of the new mathematics will be. It could be that the kind of mathematics content is specified at such a low level of sophistication that it does not really challenge pupils intellectually, or prepare them for advanced study.

Third, this is not – as some officials would have the public believe – an intervention that addresses the deep systemic problems in the education system. At best, the new proposals will alter the external features of the assessment system, rather than intervene in changing the quality of teaching and learning in our schools.

So, once again, a symbolically important act – with a really impressive architecture – could, in the end, not make any difference to the competence of teaching or the learning opportunities encountered in the daily lives of schools.

The only solace is that there is time before the new system



At best, the new proposals will alter the external features of the assessment system

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is implemented in Grade 10 in 2006, reaching the Grade 12 class in 2008.

In this context, a number of questions remain unresolved in the current proposals.

How exactly will the nation's teachers be prepared for the new curriculum? What kind of resources will be dedicated to training teachers, to enable them to deal with the complexity of the new assessment system? How will government secure buy-in from parents – and not only the middle classes, who already harbour serious doubts about the question of scholastic standards?

And how will teachers, already suffering from reform fatigue, be convinced that yet another round of education change actually works in their best professional interests?

It is one thing to announce (yet another) education reform; it is a totally different matter to secure the trust of your stakeholders, whose children's lives are at stake (in the case of parents) and whose professional capacities are being taxed (in the case of teachers).

But, perhaps the most important test of the new assessment system is whether it has the authority and credibility to change the behaviour of higher education institutions.

For many years, universities have developed their own systems of assessment to decide two things: one, whether to allow access in the first place and, two, to decide in what academic pro-

grammes students would be placed.

In addition, specific academic departments (such as psychology or economics) might add their own internal assessments in making judgments of student capacity for advanced study in those fields.

Why has this happened? For the very good reason that the existing system – the matriculation examination – could not be trusted: it is, by all accounts, a poor predictor of success in university.

Can the new assessment system restore the trust of sceptical higher education institutions?

I somehow doubt it. It now appears – in the current proposals – that it is possible to pass the Grade 12 examinations with four subjects “partly achieved” (30 to 39%) and three subjects “adequately achieved” (40 to 49%). Think about this: you could fly through high school without having achieved a single subject pass of 50% – the basic minimum in almost any self-respecting national state.

But the education devil is in the curriculum detail. And it might be that somewhere between now and 2006 tremendous progress will be made with specifying content, threshold levels for university entry, and a detailed implementation plan.

But, then again, the track record of the Department of Education in delivering high-quality, on-time, prepared systems of delivery is not at all impressive.

It remains to be seen.

Jonathan Jansen