

## Opinion Analysis

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If I had to make the choice with my own children today, I would seriously consider not sending my child to school in South Africa, for one simple reason: I do not trust a system that makes it possible for a child to pass Grade 12 with 30% in some subjects and 40% in other subjects. I would be filled with fear when I discover that you can get 32% in mathematics and 27% in physical science and still get an official document that says you can continue to study towards a Bachelors degree at university. I would worry myself senseless when I enrol my child in Grade 1 knowing that she could be among the more than half-a-million children who would not make it through to Grade 12. I would be horrified at the possibility that the principal might force her to do mathematical literacy because someone decided she could not do pure mathematics, because it would make the school's pass averages look bad. And I would be angry when I find that she is guaranteed to be among the 96% pass rate for Life Orientation when all the other subjects in the national Senior Certificate have pass rates way below this number.

It is extremely difficult to fail Grade 12 in South Africa today. You have to put in a special effort, miss your classes, deliberately provide wrong answers to questions, and hand in your paper early during an exam session and maybe, just maybe, you will fail.

But you would not sense this crisis in the Grade 12 examinations because the major newspapers, with one or two exceptions, have swallowed the lies from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) that more than 70% of our children "passed" this national examination. Never before have there been so many distinctions, we are told. More children are qualifying to study at university, we are informed. Education is getting better and better every year; we should all be happy.

There is nothing to be happy about. How do I know this? First of all, a large percentage of the students who passed Grade 12 will struggle to pass in the first years of university, not only in fields that require mathematics and science. University lecturers will tell you that in their experience, students over the years have gotten weaker even as the matriculation results on the outside get stronger.

Second, all universities, as a result, spend huge amounts of management time discussing the problem of what in my business we call 'throughput rates.' We worry, as university leaders, about the large numbers who drop out or repeat courses and years, simply because we made the mistake of believing that a pass in Grade 12 means a student is qualified to study at university. We are penalised in the government subsidy for high failure and drop-out rates, and we scramble every year to improve the throughput rate. We fail to do this effectively.

Third, students graduate from weaker universities with the same conceptual and skill limitations with which they came through school. Where does this deficiency show up? In the workplace. Talk to any employer in business and industry and they will tell you the same story: today's graduates are weak, even incompetent, in the basic skills of reasoning, writing, and computing; they cannot work in teams; they are inarticulate in public; they cannot solve complex problems; they lack the rigour of hard work; there is, in other words, a huge gap between what the school or university diploma says, and what graduates can actually do in the real world.

This is the reason why many universities set or participate in other admission examinations to find out what students really know before they select them. Medical schools, for example, take the National Benchmark Tests very seriously as an additional measure of student knowledge in mathematics and languages. The greater the inflation of the NSC marks, the more ridiculous the selections for medicine. That is why you find students easily obtaining 7 distinctions with averages in the 90s with hundreds of other students from our top schools. The point is this: the more you push up student marks from below, the more you push the top-performing student marks into the ridiculous 90s.

What can prospective university students do? If your average mark in the NSC is below 70%, you should consider not going to university and, if you do, be prepared to work very, very hard in order to survive if you go to one of the top 9 universities in South Africa. In other words, do not take your school marks too seriously; you will be disappointed. It should be completely normal for you to obtain four or five distinctions, because the level set for passing is so low.

What can parents do? Be happy with your child about his or her top marks in school, but keep their feet on the ground. Be realistic about your own expectations. Seven A's is no longer a guarantee of a place in medicine or architecture because there are simply too many students doing well at that level. Ignore completely the marks in Life Orientation—virtually everybody gets more than 70 or 80 percent, unless they spent time in prison. In other words, encourage your child to think of distinctions as completely normal and no longer as the exception.

What should universities do? At the University of the Free State we have increased our admission standards. We will not participate in this fraud that transfers the failures of primary school into secondary school (note how many students receive automatic promotion), and the failure of secondary schooling into university education. I have asked my senior colleagues in some disciplines, like Medicine, to consider going beyond familiar paper-and-pencil tests and interview the top students. We have taken our marketing efforts to the top schools in the country, of all colours and classes, so that Kopsies stands out as a top academic university among its peers. We have introduced more demanding courses for undergraduate students, and we have hired more top professors to join our excellent team of academics. We require class attendance in more and more modules, and we do not spend funds on students who fail a course or module. We have tightened the rules for progression so that a student who repeatedly fails is gently coaxed out of the university.

If we do not do this as universities, it is only a matter of time before ALL 23 institutions of higher learning become like our schools—good on paper but weak in reality. It is then also on a matter of time before this country with its still enormous potential becomes yet another failed African state.

We dare not let this happen. We must push back against mediocrity. We must measure our success not by the results of the students who pass well, but by the results of the hundreds of thousands who fail and pass poorly every year.

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