

# Arguments for the GEC

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## **Why might a Grade 9 exit certificate be important in the South African context?**

Over the years, many in education have argued for a Grade 9 General Education Certificate, or GEC. I avoid using the term 'exit' as that easily confuses people and sends the wrong message. A GEC was proposed already in the 1995 Education White Paper 1. The White Paper does not really explain its rationale, but there are essentially four justifications commonly put forward.

First, and this is what the White Paper seems to be emphasising, there is **an accountability requirement**. Grade 9 represents the end of the General Education and Training band in the school curriculum, and the South African Schools Act compulsory schooling provisions are premised on the assumption that everyone should complete at least Grade 9. A GEC would thus be a way of ensuring not only that everyone was completing Grade 9, but that schools were providing education of the required quality up to that level. In the absence of a GEC, all that youths would obtain at the end of Grade 9 is the school's own academic report card, based on standards with very limited external quality controls. One thing the GEC may do is bring to the fore a problem which hardly anyone seems to worry about: around a tenth of young South Africans, mostly in certain rural areas, do not get to complete even Grade 9 successfully. There has been much talk about the problem of dropping out from Grade 10 onwards, but even below this there is a problem.

Secondly, a GEC would provide a better basis for **decisions on what subjects each learner would take in grades 10 to 12**. Since 2012, when mathematics of some kind became compulsory for all grades 10 to 12 students, a key choice, often poorly made, has been that between mathematics and mathematical literacy. Researchers, those at universities dealing with incoming students, schools and learners themselves have found that often learners took mathematics when they should have taken mathematical literacy, and vice versa.

Third, and very importantly, a GEC is needed for **proper articulation between schools and TVET colleges**. Most of the training occurring at these colleges is at the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels 2 to 4, which is equivalent grades 10 to 12 at schools. What has been happening up to now is that colleges have been extremely reluctant to take learners from schools who have less than a Grade 12 National Senior Certificate (NSC), simply because colleges do not know the competencies of learners without this qualification. A highly inefficient arrangement has thus prevailed where youths essentially do NQF levels 2 to 4 *twice*, first at a school, and then at a college. This is inefficient, costly and also inequitable insofar as if some receive the service twice, this is at the cost of others who receive nothing. It is difficult to establish what the age and school qualifications profiles are of students currently in TVET colleges, and this information gap is in itself a problem. However, Stats SA age patterns confirm the inefficiency. Of youths aged 25 and below in colleges, only 13% are aged 18 or younger. Only 5% of 18-year-olds are in a college, against 16% of 20-year-olds<sup>1</sup>. Comparing Stats SA data to official NSC reports moreover makes it clear that extremely few youths, around 2% of them, obtain a qualification from a TVET college without *first* obtaining the NSC<sup>2</sup>. If the system worked as it should, and the flow from schools, specifically from below Grade 12, to colleges was efficient, this percentage would be much higher.

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis of Community Survey 2016 microdata.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Basic Education (2016). *Report on progress in the schooling sector against key learner performance and attainment indicators*. Pretoria.

Fourth, the GEC would help to **match youths with employers in the labour market**, for the around 45% of youths who do not obtain the Grade 12 NSC<sup>3</sup>. What should be emphasised is that though the youth unemployment situation is extremely serious, it is incorrect to conclude that employers saturate the pool of youths with an NSC before they turn to youths with less than this. The situation is bad for both groups, but the gap is not as great as many believe: Stats SA data point to around 53% of youths aged 25 to 29 with the NSC being employed, against 41% for youths with no qualification. The latter group would obviously be largely in low skills occupations. Yet they are a substantial group, and better information on what the skills of these youths are would contribute towards efficient recruitment, and arguably greater productivity in the workplace.

### **What do you make of the criticisms of the certificate?**

Over the years, there has been some resistance to introducing the GEC, though that is probably not the main reason why it has taken 25 years to reach somewhere near the top of the policy agenda. What has probably been a larger reason is simply the number of other structural changes the GEC has had to compete with in the schooling sector: curriculum reform, the Annual National Assessments programme, book distribution systems, and so on. Resistance to the GEC has largely taken the form of a concern that it would ‘dumb down’ the system by encouraging youths to leave school earlier. I do not see that as being a risk at all. The output of National Senior Certificates from the schooling sector, and learners obtaining that certificate with a Bachelors-level endorsement, giving them entry to degree studies at a university, has been continuously rising, according to both the official education reports and Stats SA data. The percentage of youths successfully completing Grade 12 has risen from around 44% to 54% in the last ten years<sup>4</sup>. Given how much the ‘Matric’ is valued in South African society, I cannot see the introduction of the GEC diluting the interest in the Grade 12 qualification. Secondary schools have for years been subject to an accountability system that places enormous emphasis on NSC results. That system will continue. I cannot see any scenario other than one where successful completion of Grade 12 continues to increase. Of course, one cannot be totally sure of anything in the future, and there would need to be careful monitoring to ensure that progress against this indicator does not fall behind. For me, the benefits of the GEC far outweigh the unlikely risks some have foreseen.

It is worth remembering that improving successful completion of twelve years of schooling is not an overnight phenomenon, mainly because it takes time for the quality of schooling to improve. It is poor quality education in earlier grades which explains most of the dropping out in grades below Grade 12, and why around a fifth of learners who sit for the Grade 12 examinations do not obtain the NSC. Malaysia, a relatively successful developing country in education terms, increased its percentage of youths completing secondary schooling by 0.8 percentage points a year between 1970 and 2000. This is the speed we are moving at. Clearly, it will take many years before South Africa reaches the point where Germany or Japan are today, where everyone completes twelve years. Even in the United States, a tenth of youths do not. If anything, the GEC should assist more youths in obtaining the NSC, in particular if the GEC brings about a stronger emphasis on quality at the lower secondary level.

The introduction of the GEC would put us in line with many other developing countries. Both Botswana and Namibia have a Grade 10 qualification. Namibia, which for historical reasons

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<sup>3</sup> See Africa Check’s confirmation of this level of completion of the NSC. Post titled ‘The flaw in SA’s ‘real’ matric pass rate figure (as calculated by the EFF & DA)’. URL <https://africacheck.org/spot-check/the-flaw-in-sas-real-matric-pass-rate-figure-as-calculated-by-the-eff-da/>.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 8 of the official 2018 NSC report, *National Senior Certificate: 2018 examination report*, available at <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/NSC%202018%20Examination%20Report%20WEB.pdf?ver=2019-01-03-085338-000> (I produced the analysis in this section of the report). I am referring to the full report here, not the slide presentation.

had South Africa's schooling system imposed on it, introduced its Grade 10 qualification ten years after independence.

If there is a concern that warrants careful attention, it is the concern that the GEC would result in a rather different type of student entering TVET colleges, one who is younger and with on average lower competencies than is currently the case. This will require TVET colleges to adjust their teaching. But it also places an added responsibility on the schooling sector to ensure that learners who reach Grade 9 have acquired the competencies they should have at that level.

**Does South Africa's public education system have the capacity to roll out a new Grade 9 certificate?**

I think it does. The thinking seems to be that the GEC would be based on national examinations in just key subjects, perhaps English and mathematics. With just those subjects, the GEC should amply fulfil its purpose. Knowing reliably what someone's competencies are in those two subjects is extremely helpful in assessing that person's readiness for a range of subjects and vocational programmes. There are several options which could be explored. Brazil's ENEM upper secondary examination, their Matric, has since 2009 been based entirely on multiple choice questions, and serves its purpose relatively well. Basing at least some of the GEC on examination via multiple choice questions would be one way of reducing costs.

**What would be required in terms of implementation to make a Grade 9 certificate work?**

There are a number of complexities which must be thought through carefully for the GEC to be a success, and not to suffer the fate of the Annual National Assessments. The purpose must be made very clear in policy, as this drives everything else. The purpose must also be clearly communicated. How the GEC would be used to determine grade repetition would need to be resolved. Currently, grade repetition is about twice as high in Grade 10 (around 20%) as in Grade 9 (around 10%). The GEC is likely to switch that around, which has implications for class sizes and teacher provisioning.

I have already mentioned the question of the competencies of youths entering TVET colleges.

A further concern relates to the logistics around the issuing of the certificate. It has been proposed that even if all learners write the GEC examinations, only those applying for the certificate would obtain it. Presumably, this would be to reduce costs, and allay fears that the GEC would incentivise an early exit from education (a risk I believe is virtually non-existent, as explained above). If the certificate were to be obtained as a result of an application, the logistics around this should be good. One should remember that youths may only realise a few years after Grade 9 that they need the certificate, for instance if they leave school after Grade 11 to go to a TVET college. The logistics around the National Senior Certificate where youths accumulate credits has not been good. Youths have struggled to find out when they have sufficient credits, or how to combine results in a new certificate, especially if credits were obtained in different provinces. These types of problems should not be replicated in the GEC.