

Huge benefits from GEC

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ASSESSMENTS in schools have featured prominently in the news. Annual National Assessments (ANA) controversies have overshadowed a related assessment and certification question: the proposed Grade 9 General Education Certificate (GEC). While critics of the GEC raise a few reasonable concerns, we believe these are outweighed by the GEC's likely benefits.

Originally proposed in the 1995 White Paper on Education and Training, the GEC failed to gain momentum until a recommendation by a ministerial task team last year to introduce the GEC, largely as a way of facilitating movement



into educational streams beyond Grade 9, reinvigorated the proposal.

Three arguments are commonly made to counter the GEC.

First, it is argued that it will not facilitate movement from schools to technical and vocational education (TVET) colleges.

Second, it is argued that the certificate will not improve the employment prospects for youths. Third, the argument is made that a Grade 9 certificate will deflect attention from the goal of at least 12 years of education for all. We present our case in the form of responses to these three objections.

There is a contradiction between South Africa's schools and TVET colleges. Although grades 10 to 12 and most TVET college training are officially equivalent levels of education, by the time students enter TVET colleges, close to 90 percent of them already have a Grade 12 National Senior Certificate. If the system worked as it should, students would move from Grade 9 to a TVET college. In fact, according to household survey figures, nearly 1 percent of those entering a college do so straight after

Grade 9.

This repetition of an equivalent educational level represents a waste of time and money.

The problem is that colleges have no way of assessing the competencies of pupils from Grade 9 as there is no standard qualification at this level.

In the absence of a basis for assessing which pupils are suited for which TVET programmes, colleges understandably avoid taking in anyone without Grade 12.

But colleges are also understandably concerned about, for instance, the mathematics competency levels of Grade 9 school-leavers. Educational quality concerns strengthen

The need for the GEC. Exams and qualifications, if well designed and implemented, have a way of improving ac-

countability, from the classroom level, up to the school and national levels.

The Grade 9 ANA tests, introduced in 2012, put teaching methods at the lower secondary level under the spotlight. These tests do not result in a qualification, but they do constitute an excellent building block for a future GEC. It is worth remembering that many neighbouring countries which produce better results than South Africa in the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) tests have national exams and certification at the lower secondary and even primary levels. Swaziland, a relatively good performer in SACMEQ, has national exams in grades 7 and 10. Namibia, which has displayed noteworthy SACMEQ improvements, introduced a Grade 10 qualification in 1993, shortly

after independence, for reasons similar to those put forward by our task team in favour of the GEC. A confounding factor in the GEC debate has been the misperception that any schooling below Grade 12 offers virtually no employment opportunities. The dynamics are more complex than this.

According to Stats SA labour force survey data, unemployment rates (counting discouraged job-seekers as unemployed) for 25 to 29-year-olds were 54 percent for those with only Grade 9, against 40 percent for those with only successful completion of Grade 12. Neither of these figures are good, yet clearly employment is not impossible for those with just Grade 9. In absolute terms, there are nearly 800 000 employed with just Grade 12, aged 25 to 29, against nearly 730 000 of those

with just Grade 9, 10 or 11. It is the latter group which would have been able to use their GCE to signal their competencies within the labour market, had the qualification existed, and thus be more efficiently matched to jobs. Prospective employers would have had a standard measure of the maths and English competencies of each certificate-holder.



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