

Dear Colleagues

## **Benchmarking Analysis: The National Senior Certificate (The Republic of South Africa)**

In 2008 the first cohort of learners at Grade 12 in South Africa wrote the National Senior Certificate examination. Once the results were released, various commentators speculated in the press about the quality of the new NSC qualification and its associated curriculum. Some of the perceptions that were reported did not encourage public confidence in our education system and frankly, did not do justice to the many dedicated education policy makers, government officials, teachers and learners in our country who had overseen the introduction of the new qualification.

It was the disquiet that the IEB felt as a result of these speculations that encouraged us to consider an independent evaluation of the qualification and its associated curriculum. The intention in driving this evaluation was to provide a commentary on the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum and qualification. Such an evaluation was intended to provide a concrete point from which to discuss the curriculum and qualification rather than perceptions and speculations and opinions of various users of the South African system, each of whom may have had their own experience or point of view to express or justify.

In other words, the key purpose for this benchmarking exercise was to facilitate the introduction and strengthen the implementation of the NSC by providing stakeholders and the wider public with an objective study of the new National Senior Certificate. In the opinion of the IEB, such a study would provide valuable information for future reviews of the curriculum, guiding improvements at this crucial point in rebuilding our nation. It would enable South Africa as a nation either to be satisfied that our education system is of an international standard or to be informed of where the system needs attention to ensure international comparability. Either way, in our view, the South African society would benefit from the exercise.

Umalusi has undertaken a self-evaluation of the qualification and curriculum underpinning the NSC from a South African perspective. This can be described as an 'inside-looking-out' exercise i.e. South Africa's opinion of the standing of its qualification in relation to other qualifications it deals with on a regular basis. The report from this exercise is expected to be released later this year.

The other perspective could be called an 'outside-looking-in' perspective i.e. how is the South African qualification is viewed by respected evaluation organisations from outside South Africa. This is an equally important perspective as it complements the impression of the earlier exercise. It would be an impossible situation if the South African view of its qualification was substantially different to the perception of an independent external evaluator, respected internationally.

It is in the interests of South Africa that the NSC is evaluated by a respected international organisation. The IEB approached UK NARIC to undertake the review. UK NARIC is the United Kingdom's National Agency responsible for providing information and advice about vocational, academic and professional skills and qualifications from all over the world. They are also involved in research, consultancy and training internationally.

The IEB was successful in obtaining financial assistance from 3 funding sources: the Zenex Foundation which has a strategic objective to assist learners to achieve a quality National Senior

Certificate which in turn provides a pathway to careers in scarce skills in South Africa; the Anglo American Chairman's Fund, which, throughout its nearly 60 year history, has worked with thousands of ordinary South Africans who do extraordinary things to uplift their fellow citizens and finally the University of Pretoria, an institution which understands the importance of international recognition and understanding of the South African system. The Board of the IEB, under the chairmanship of Professor Crain Soudien, was quick to see the significance of this exercise and did not hesitate to allocate financial as well as human resources to it. All four donors committed themselves to the international benchmarking exercise to ensure that the new school-leaving qualification has both credibility and quality status in South Africa and internationally. Through the participation in the benchmarking project all four funding organisations have shown their support to an important initiative of the Department of Education. The report itself is easy to read, its findings are re-assuring and its recommendations are sobering. In short, the South African qualification meets its intended international standards.

The IEB is proud to have lead this project and be in a position to make this report available to the system at large. Personally, I would like to thank the IEB staff, officials from HESA, Umalusi and the Department of Basic Education who made themselves available to prepare additional documentation as required and to answer questions from the UK NARIC researchers, during their field visit in January 2010. I would like to thank HESA, and in particular Cobus Lötter and Abbey Mathega, as well as the IEB Chairman and Board members for their consistent support and encouragement. Without the additional funding from the Zenex Foundation, the Anglo American Chairman's Fund and the University of Pretoria, the project would not have been possible. Finally, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge the intensive engagement with UK NARIC researchers, Ms Cloud Bai-Yun, the CEO of UK NARIC, and Mr Chris Lyons, the senior researcher on this project. Their commitment to understand fully the idiosyncrasies of the South African system and to provide a useful report for us to work with, is testimony to their professionalism.

Yours sincerely

Anne Oberholzer  
CEO  
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