



What is the role of Umalusi in the IEB NSC examination?

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Umalusi ensures that each examining body is subjected to Umalusi's quality assurance processes, i.e. examination papers are externally moderated, the assessment body is subject to a state of readiness evaluation to ensure that it is adequately prepared to conduct the examination, the conduct of the examination and marking is monitored and finally the examination results are subject to the Umalusi standardisation process. In respect of external moderation, Umalusi ensures coverage and balance of content in the curriculum, adherence to the assessment body's subject assessment guidelines in respect of demand and general quality and appearance of the papers. Umalusi's external moderation process considers the examination papers broadly in terms of standards expected at the end of 12 years of schooling.

Umalusi does not directly compare examination papers in order to make public statements about standards across assessment bodies. There are very good reasons why such an exercise is meaningless. Research is clear that comparisons of standards in two different assessments can only be achieved either by a common group of students writing both assessments or by all students writing a common set of questions. Both strategies pose reliability and validity issues for researchers.

Furthermore, if two learners writing the same examination achieve the same mark, it is impossible to deduce that they are equally competent – they could have got different

questions correct, their papers could have been marked by different markers, one of whom is stricter or more lenient than the other, the one learner might have been feeling off colour on the day of the examination and so on. If it is impossible to compare the competence of learners with the same mark within an examining body, it is certainly impossible to compare learners with the same marks across assessment bodies. One has to look at other indicators, e.g. success in other common assessments, success in tertiary study and so on.

Given that the South African system accommodates the possibility of more than one examining authority, there is the understanding that different educational needs are being met by the different assessments. This understanding is one reason why direct comparison of standards across assessment bodies is an impossible exercise.

It should also be noted that standards are not set in examination papers alone. The following processes impact on standards:

- The quality of the school-based assessment – its setting, conduct and marking;
- The quality of assessment of orals and practical and the standardisation processes across schools;
- The actual conduct of the examination, its integrity and efficiency;
- The marking process including the discussions of the marking guidelines, monitoring markers and moderation;
- The capacity of the markers and hence the quality of marking;
- The resulting and certification process and the attendant administrative processes.

So even if examination papers could be effectively compared and deemed equivalent in demand, there are multiple

variables, some of which have been identified, that impact on the outcome and hence standards. These aspects challenge any conclusions of direct comparability. There is no authority internationally that compares examination papers or results from different assessments and deduces that they reflect the same level of competence. The most that is possible is broad comparability.

The assessment body's subject assessment guidelines must meet, but may exceed, the minimum requirements as set out in the curriculum. Given that the vast majority of learners that write the IEB examination qualify for further study, it is appropriate that the IEB subject assessment guidelines are shaped to ensure that learners are challenged to develop the skills, understanding and attitudes they require for success in further learning. It is essential that learners aim higher than the minimum; this strategy has been successfully employed by the IEB and the schools that write the IEB examination, as their results show. Subject results of IEB candidates in 2011 indicate that the total number of subject results from the 8 281 learners who wrote the 2011 IEB NSC examination was 60 462. Of these 85% were 50% or higher, 94% were 40% or higher and 99% of subject scores in the IEB in 2011 were 30% and above. IEB students achieve beyond the minimum requirements.

Does the adjustment of subject results applied by Umalusi in its standardisation process ensure the comparability of standards across examining boards?

No. This process ensures comparability of results within an assessment body, from one year to the next.

Umalusi's decisions about the standardisation of subjects have been used on occasion to try and make a case for the comparability of standards across examining boards. For example, the claim is as follows: because a similar number of subjects were adjusted upwards or downwards or were left unchanged, standards across boards must be comparable. This is a simple misunderstanding about the Umalusi standardisation process.

Umalusi adjustments are made on the basis of an examination in a year within an assessment body. The results of an examination may be adjusted after comparison of the current year's results in that subject, within that assessment body, over a 3 to 5 year period. If the historical performance is above the performance in the current year, the results are adjusted upwards and if the historical performance is below the performance in the current year, the results are adjusted downwards. There is absolutely no consideration of performance in the same subject in another examining authority. Hence, to use adjustments to draw the conclusion that standards across examining bodies are comparable is erroneous.

Umalusi has published a comprehensive commentary about the standardisation process which is available from their website. The IEB has also published an explanation of the standardisation process. A copy of this explanation is available under FAQs on the IEB website under the question: *How does Umalusi standardise the final National Senior Certificate examination results?*