

Benchmarking Analysis:

The National Senior Certificate (Republic of South Africa)

UK NARIC

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Executive Summary

In 2009 the Independent Examinations Board (IEB) commissioned UK NARIC to undertake a benchmarking study of the new National Senior Certificate (NSC) in the Republic of South Africa. The focus of the study has addressed two key areas, namely to provide an analysis of the state developed qualification design features; secondly, to review the IEB testing and assessment mechanisms at NSC level. Thus, the report considers both how the qualification has been designed, and also then how the IEB conducts its testing.

Since 1994 the South African education system has undergone a series of dramatic reform and changes, reflecting the social and cultural developments taking place within the nation as a whole. As a part of these fundamental changes, the South African National Department of Education – now referred to as the National Department of Basic Education (DoBE) – developed the National Senior Certificate (NSC), introduced in 2006 at Grade 10, with the first cohort of Grade 12 papers written in 2008. The introduction of the NSC coincided with the replacement of Matriculation in the Senior Certificate. The NSC represents the exit qualification from senior secondary education, and for successful candidates also provides access onto higher education.

NSC examination is conducted at the end of Grade 12, and students are tested by the national department or the Independent Examinations Board, and such other assessment bodies as have been accredited by Umalusi, the independent national body that provides quality assurance.

The two-fold purpose of this study results in an evaluation of the rigor and robustness of the NSC qualification, considering the key features of the qualification construction and design, and how the qualification is intended to work ‘in theory’. The report has also considered how the qualification operates ‘in practice’, from delivery at school level through to assessment. This aspect of testing has been viewed through the lens of IEB practice and procedures, although the outcomes of this report are intended to be indicative of the state of the NSC in its entirety.

Against the backdrop of development and change within South Africa, it has also been important to consider the context within which the educational advances have been made. To this end, UK NARIC has consulted a wide range of stakeholders, incorporating Umalusi, the providers of NSC quality assurance, Higher Education South Africa, the Department of Basic Education and experts and advisors at the IEB.

This report has found that substantial and extensive development work had taken place with the NSC in the post-1994 period, with a prolific output of materials produced both by the provincial departments, national departments and also by the Independent Examinations Board.

In particular, the report notes the importance and value associated with the development and application of the Subject Assessment Guidelines, both national department and IEB, which facilitate the delivery of the National Curriculum Statement aims and clarify examinable content at Grade 12.

The report is satisfied that the features of the NSC indicate a qualification with an underlying level that is both robust and fit for the purposes of examining senior secondary school levels. In terms of the qualification's comparability, the report concludes that the National Senior Certificate at Grade 12 is broadly comparable to the GCE AS-level. For those candidates who undertake the IEB Advanced Programme in Mathematics, the report is satisfied that the additional content is more reflective of the requirements of the GCE A level. Furthermore, it is noted that there are considerations to develop an advanced paper for English Home Language; it could be surmised that an advanced paper could further enhance the comparability of the subject to GCE A level standard.

Whilst the report finds broad comparability with the GCE AS-level standard, it also highlights there are variances in level and content from one subject to another. Although this does not alter the fundamental findings of the report, close scrutiny of subject by subject analysis is recommended to determine a more exact level of comparability between the individual NSC and GCE subjects. This is exemplified by the organisation of NSC Physical Sciences which is necessarily compared with GCE Physics and Chemistry, since there is no Physical Sciences counterpart.

During the course of this study, a number of key issues were either raised by stakeholders within South Africa, or were uncovered by the research work. On the basis of these findings, the report makes a number of recommendations aimed at improving the success of the NSC as a national qualification, and acting to consolidate its status within South Africa. In principle, the key recommendations can be summarised as follows:

Firstly, further work is required to ensure that the 'general level' required at the point of exit is broadly consistent from one subject to the next. This recommendation does not discount the invaluable developmental work that has already driven the NSC forward, from the realisation of the National Curriculum Statement in 2003 to the application of Learning Programme Guidelines and Subject Assessment Guidelines in 2006 and 2008. Anecdotal evidence from stakeholders suggested that this fine-tuning work is a work in progress; likewise, greater clarity and understanding of the NCS requirements has already been achieved.

Secondly, the absence of a qualification broadly comparable to the GCSE in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is problematic. In its conclusions, this report emphasises the importance of providing recognition of educational achievement on a fundamental level. The GCSE represents the building block in the development of an individual's education. Subject to improvements in the provision of foundation education, and satisfactory individual achievement in English Language, subject attainment at the end of Grade 10 could then be considered comparable to the GCSE standard.

Specific improvements would be needed to ensure a more satisfactory crossover of content between Grade R to 9, and Grade 10. The importance of formally recognised achievement by the end of Grade 10 should not be underestimated and would be representative of the negotiation of a minimum threshold of standards. The need for a benchmark at this level does not necessarily suggest an obligatory exit point at Grade 10 but underlines the benefits of identifying a distinction between the standard at foundation education level and at senior secondary level.

This leads onto a third observation – the notable shortfall between NSC participation and Grade 12 NSC pass grades. Currently, statistical analysis suggests that only one-third of students starting Grade 10 are subsequently promoted to Grade 12, a factor that immediately highlights two critical issues: firstly, recognition of achievement up to Grade 12 needs to be formally recognised; secondly, it is imperative that progression and pass grades improve and that drop-out rates diminish. This will not only improve the success of the NSC but will also increase its relevance to the young South African population.

Finally, there is a clear need to ensure that the provision of well-qualified teachers is available throughout the whole of South Africa. This could focus both on the up-skilling of current teachers and on increasing the volume of readily available skilled teachers. Teacher training considerations should focus on a commitment to a specific B.Ed teacher training programme, incorporated alongside a drive to increase the numbers of skilled teachers currently working, with the aim of gradually raising the standard of delivery. The national department's Foundations in Learning document, and the Student's Guide could be central to attaining these goals. An improvement of the educational provision from Grades R to 9 would further facilitate the increase in NSC success rates, whilst serving to strengthen the links between achievement at Grade 9 and the start of NSC at Grade 10.

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