

International comparability of National Senior Certificate

The South African public is often misled by a notion that local qualifications are not accepted internationally. Such misconceptions, which arise for a variety of reasons, provide the basis for the promotion of international examinations that are on offer locally, albeit that these are not necessarily offered by system-trained teachers.

These international qualifications are probably well-suited to people whose jobs require them to work in a variety of countries during the school life of their children such as diplomats, senior executives in multi-national companies and so on. Internationally it is a known phenomenon that schools that focus learning and teaching on one or other of the international qualifications (such as examinations offered by Cambridge International Examinations or the International Baccalaureate Organisation) enable learners to move from one country to another and not be negatively affected by having to adjust to a new curriculum each time they move.

In practice, most countries develop a curriculum to suit their own country's needs and circumstances and visitors to the country for short periods are required to adjust. Clearly it is educationally sound for a learner to follow a structured curriculum from the start to the finish of their school career and hence the attraction of an international qualification.

In other instances, one of the main driving factors for offering an international qualification is to be able to offer an 'internationally accepted' curriculum so that learners are internationally benchmarked. This implies that unless a learner offers a qualification that has an "international tag" attached to it, the curriculum, and presumably the associated assessment, is not internationally accepted. This is misguided and does need further interrogation.

Within the structures of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), there is a unit called the Centre for the Evaluation of Educational Qualifications (CEEQ) which specialises in and has the authority to evaluate the qualifications of foreigners entering the country. They benchmark the qualifications of foreigners against the South African education system in an effort to advise those foreigners of the courses of study in South Africa, to which their qualification allows them access. Such units are unique and offer specialised services. Virtually every country¹, and certainly all developed countries, has such a body responsible for benchmarking foreign qualifications within local education systems. Interestingly, even international qualifications are subjected to similar benchmarking exercises.

It is worth emphasising that the South African school-leaving examination too is benchmarked against the education system in most foreign countries where South African school-leavers wish to further their studies. For example, the UK National Academic Recognition Information Centre (UK NARIC) is the official UK evaluation authority appointed by the British Government. UK NARIC has a substantial International Comparisons database of qualifications from all over the world which they have benchmarked against each other and which is used extensively by evaluation centres across the world.

In that database the upper performance ranges of the Senior Certificate, the South African school-leaving examination up to 2007, was benchmarked

by UK NARIC as follows:

The Senior Certificate (with matriculation endorsement) and at least 3 B symbols and 2 C symbols at higher grade is considered comparable to the overall GCE Advanced / Scottish Advanced Higher standard; Standard grades A-C compare to GCSE grade C or higher; Higher grades A-E compare to at least GCSE grade C or higher.

This international recognition such as that of the Senior Certificate, there are numerous examples of learners from South African schools who have gained admission to top universities in foreign countries – England, Scotland, the United States of America, and Australia, to name a few. Certainly in respect of IEB learners, there is ample evidence from the schools that these learners attended, that they have performed exceptionally well at the foreign universities, bringing credit not only to themselves but to the education they received in South Africa. It would be misleading then to suggest that the curriculum they have followed, the education they have received and the assessment of their capabilities is not of an internationally acceptable standard.

There is no reason to believe that the new National Senior Certificate will not enjoy similar recognition. In developing the new curriculum the Department of Education was very mindful of ensuring that the new curriculum for South Africa met world-class standards. In fact once the new National Curriculum Statements were completed, the Department of Education provided them to various educational authorities in Scotland, England, Kenya, Australia, Malaysia and Singapore for comment. The feedback has been sufficiently positive for Minister Pandor to go on record in the media, referring to our new curriculum as world-class.

Over and above the admission of local school-leavers abroad, the local universities are popular study destinations for foreign students – 55 000 international students studied at South African universities in 2005 – requiring foreign benchmarks for local universities on the basis of foreign school qualifications. The Matriculation Board of the Committee of University Principals² maintains a set of more than 170 system specific foreign benchmarked equivalences for admission to bachelor's degree studies as submitted for approval to the Minister of Education (MoE) and gazetted in the *Government Gazette* from time to time.

The introduction of the NSC according to the three-tier programme based minimum higher education admission requirements, prompted Higher Education South Africa (HESA) to consider the activation of an NSC-based equivalence setting research project to map foreign qualifications to the three required minimum admission levels for the NSC - for degree, diploma and higher certificate entry. While the focus of HESA is to benchmark students entering South African higher education institutions, clearly an equivalence exercise of this nature would inevitably address the other side of the question - the entry of South African learners into institutions of study in other countries.

Such activities on the part of our local education department and higher education are certainly not intended to enable South African learners to

¹ More than 50 such internationally registered organizations can be listed

² Currently administered by Higher Education South Africa

leave our country and study and work elsewhere in the world. The reason such attention is paid to international benchmarking by local curriculum developers and the education leadership is to ensure that the learners in South Africa become a human resource pool that have the skills and knowledge to make South Africa a successful competitor in the global economy. At the same time the intention is to ensure that as a nation, we retain within our curriculum the ideals and strengths of the South African nation that sets us apart from the rest of the world. We retain our own national identity at the same time as ensuring a curriculum that enjoys international acceptance.

Recently the IEB conducted a project in partnership with the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) through which South African schools were offered an opportunity to write international benchmarking tests in English and Mathematics at Grade 9 and in English, Mathematics and Science at Grade 6. The results from this project show clearly that the schools in the IEB sample compare favourably against these international benchmarks. For example, top achievers of the IEB sample are comparable to the top achievers in countries acknowledged as top performing countries in Mathematics such as Taipei and Singapore. In all subjects, the South African schools in the IEB schools sample achieved mean scores that were above the international mean, with only two exceptions. The mean scores in these two schools were only minimally below the international mean scores. This exercise indicates conclusively that the South African schools in the sample that offered the tests are offering education of an international standard.

From 2008 this project has been extended to include Grades 3 – 8 in tests in Mathematics, Science and English, while at Grades 9 and 10 the tests will cover Mathematics and English. This project affords South African schools the opportunity of testing their performance in fundamental learning areas against international benchmarks without having to offer a non-South African curriculum.

In discussions about the merits of different qualifications, there is the inevitable comparison that one or the other is more difficult or more challenging. Such discussions are problematic because generally they ignore the purpose of the qualification and hence the curriculum structure.

For example, if the intention of a qualification is to include as wide a variety of learning areas as is feasible within the qualification, the depth to which a learning area is studied and hence the expectations from learners will differ from a qualification where the intention is to limit the number of learning areas so that a learner can engage more deeply with concepts, knowledge and skills of the learning areas studied. The term 'challenge' in the one environment is about coping with a wide range of ways of seeing and understanding while in the second environment it is about in-depth study of a narrower range.

In addition, when learners offer more than one qualification, it is likely that in preparation for the assessment, learning and teaching has focused more on one qualification than the other, preparing learners for the kinds of questions and approaches that a particular examination favours. It stands

to reason that learners will find the examination or qualification for which they have been prepared primarily, easier to cope with than a qualification which has not been the primary focus for preparation in learning and teaching. Because the different demands of the second qualification have not been the primary focus in the preparation of learners, they are likely to find the second qualification more challenging.

While there are a variety of reasons why a school may select to offer an international qualification, there are equally compelling reasons for South African independent schools to offer the local school-leaving examination, whether through the state system or through the IEB. The question of whether to offer the state examination or the IEB examination for the National Senior Certificate is a different discussion. What is worth considering here are the reasons why South African independent schools should offer the South African National Senior Certificate.

The most compelling reason is that independent schools have resources that can contribute positively to the improvement of South African education in general and to the improvement of education in specific communities. If a school is offering the same curriculum as neighbouring schools in less privileged communities, it is able to share its resources more meaningfully with those neighbouring communities. In this instance the independent school teachers are familiar with the curriculum demands and hence can engage with other teachers on common problems, they can share worksheets and examinations and they can exchange teaching experiences that are based within a common curriculum. Schools that have outreach programmes of this nature testify to the richness of the experience not only on the part of the local school managers, teachers and learners to whom they offer assistance, but also on the part of the school managers, teachers and learners in the independent school.

Of key importance is the fact that the extensive experience and capacity of these teachers are not lost to the South African national project – the improvement of education for all our learners through local materials development initiatives, teaching and learning improvement initiatives and curriculum development and other important policy debates.

The IEB is of the opinion that not only does it offer a school-leaving qualification that is world-class, but also through its support of the local system and its engagement with the difficult educational issues that face our country, the IEB provides the schools and learners that are registered with it an opportunity to feed constructively into building our society into one that each of us can be proud of – where our learners have a world class curriculum, teaching that ensures that their learning is internationally comparable and in addition, they are active contributors to our national learning project.

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