

School exiting certificate: old wine in new bottles

Would a 'school exiting certificate,' which is a grade 9 school-leaving certificate as recommended by a ministerial task-team report, offers a route to career opportunities for those who do not complete a matric certificate? Perhaps, but that would depend on the way the concept is marketed, says *Andrea Juan et al.*

The introduction of a General Education and Training Certificate (GETC) at the end of compulsory schooling at the grade 9 level is intended to offer learners an 'alternative' pathway to completing a national senior certificate, or matric.

The GETC is not a new proposal. Providing school-leaving certificates to learners at the end of grade 9 was debated post-1994 and in 2003. The South African Qualifications Authority subsequently recommended a GETC policy. To implement the GETC, the then Department of Education experimented with the common tasks for assessment (CTAs) to form the basis of a standardised test to issue the GETC. Yet, concerns over both the concept and implementation of the GETC allowed the proposed policy to die a natural death.

The recent re-emergence of this debate begs the question of whether there is merit in re-examining the viability of this certificate. A Department of Basic Education ministerial task team, which assessed the quality of the National Senior Certificate, recommended this 'exiting certificate' as a response to the high dropout rate of learners after grade 9.

This debate begs the question of whether there is merit in re-examining the viability of this certificate.

The certificate is intended to firstly act as exit from grade 9 and entry credentials into traditional schooling or vocational education through technical vocational colleges (TVET) and technical secondary schools. Learners could graduate with a National Senior Certificate at the end of each of these pathways. The second intention is to act as proof of educational qualifications for entry into the labour market.

The option is not taken by many students – either because of the poor image of TVET colleges or the lack of awareness of this pathway among grade 9 learners

Viability of the GETC certificate

One of the intentions of the grade 9 schooling certificate is to encourage alternative routes to the grade 12 (or equivalent) examination. Most educational systems around the world have the traditional and the technical vocation education and training pathways, and dual streaming is a common practice internationally (Europe, Egypt, China).

The dual pathway allows a route for learners with different abilities and interests to be educated. In addition, a wide range

of skills are produced for the economy. Currently, South African learners do have the option of leaving compulsory school after grade 9 and registering at a Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college. They can then complete the National Certificate Vocational (NCV). This is not an option taken by many students – either because of the poor image of TVET colleges or the lack of awareness of this pathway among grade 9 learners. Learners should be made aware of the 50 public TVET colleges in the country which offer this option.

Job security

There is no guarantee that the certificate will provide entry into the labour market. The task team report states that the certificate will provide proof of educational status, and thus grant access to employment opportunities by providing signals to the labour market about the competencies of an individual. However, research published by the Centre for Higher Education Transformation found that, on average, South Africans who complete grade 12 have earnings between 40% and 70% higher than those with less schooling. These percentages increase with higher levels of education. The Annual National Assessments (ANA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) results show a very poor quality of mathematics achievement at the grade 9 level. Taking this into account, the value of the certificate in the labour market is questionable.

Socially acceptability of the GETC

The government cannot allow for exiting the education system with a grade 9 certificate to become a socially acceptable choice for learners. Globally, governments and societies are encouraging higher levels of education due to the extensive benefits which it provides. The 2011 Census statistics show that only 40% of citizens 20 years and older have a grade 12 or higher education qualification. We must continue to strive to increase educational levels of the population to further promote the development of the country.

Potential to hide dropout levels

The certificate has the potential to mask the high levels of dropouts. This is because learners would have successfully exited the educational system with a qualification. Leaving school at this point would therefore technically not be considered as 'dropping out'. This is what Professor Volker Wedekind calls a 'statistical solution' to a major social issue.

The introduction of a new qualification has major cost and logistical implications. If we want to improve the quality and outcomes of our education along with other initiatives, we need to create a greater awareness of the existing technical vocational routes, and introduce a repetition policy that provides additional assistance to learners who are not passing grades 10 or 11 to help them achieve the competences required at that level. ■

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Restoring the health and prosperity of the Indian Ocean

The dead coral reefs at Pointe aux Piments as photographed from a glass-bottom boat.

In many areas ocean ecosystems are under stress. How can the ecological integrity of these areas be preserved and restored in light of a growing interest in the economic potential of sea-bed exploration, intensive fishing operations and increasing shipping activities? These are the issues explored recently at 'the first conference of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) on the blue economy,' attended by high-level officials and ministers of countries bordering the Indian Ocean. *Ina van der Linde* reports.

Step into the stretch of ocean at one of the many luxury beach resorts at Pointe aux Piments, north of Port Louis in Mauritius, the sea is dead. Here one can view the direct effect of coral bleaching of the fringing reefs: corals have turned white and died after expelling the algae that helped support them. Fringing reefs are reefs that grow directly from a shore.

On the same stretch of beach the first Indian Ocean Rim Association Ministerial Conference on the Blue Economy took place to discuss how to preserve and restore the ocean ecosystems and to promote collaboration and