

Less than 40% of learners who enrolled for Grade 1 in 1991 reached Grade 12 in 2002. And only 13.7% of those who make it to matric, proceed to higher education. These are two of the startling findings in two papers presented to a colloquium at which policy-makers, implementers, the HSRC and university-based researchers presented their current research on the matric year.

But who makes it in matric? Papers by Ms Helen Perry and Professor Brahm Fleisch (School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand), and Professor Michael Kahn (HSRC), used 2002 datasets and found that although girls' enrolment and participation in schooling and matric is higher than for boys, African girls in particular perform less well than boys. But white, Indian and coloured girls outperform boys at the higher levels in all subjects.

But whose purposes is it serving? Presentations by Professor Cheryl Foxcroft (Department of Psychology, University of Port Elizabeth) and Professor Nan Yeld (Business Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town), questioned the predictive validity of the examination and suggested that matric is no longer serving the selection function for higher education that it did in the past. This raised big questions for the imminent Further and Education Training Certificate (FETC), which will replace the Matric Certificate in 2008.

A paper by Ms Peliwe Lolwane from Umalusi placed the debate within a sobering historical context. The annual drama around matric, she shows, would be familiar to our grandmothers. She shows that many of the challenges that currently confront Umalusi in establishing and maintaining standards have

changing the nature of the examination. "We are the only country in Anglophone Africa," she remarked, "that did not hang onto the Cambridge exam and developed our own".

Her paper drew attention to the silent and invisible changes that shape the school-leaving examination, its ongoing evolution in the context of history and the inevitable changes and continuities that will mark its further development into the FETC.

A number of papers highlighted issues that require attention if the FETC is to enjoy public confidence and credibility. Ms Matseleng Allais of the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE), pointed to the confusing policy and institutional environment created by the NQF, as well as the potential challenge posed for examiners in assessing outcomes that have very little content.

Mr Morgan Naidoo, Department of Education, KwaZulu-Natal, and Professor

MARKING MATRIC:

Overview of the Debate

As Kahn put it in the discussion, "we have information that shows that girls can and do outperform boys on even the hard subjects, but we do not know what the drivers of under-performance amongst African girls in poor communities are."

His paper shows that "this phenomenon is not random, but clearly systematic" across the years for which he had conducted his analysis. Such analyses have only become possible very recently, when earlier scruples about the collection of statistics on a racial basis disappeared and they once again became routine.

Matric has a decisive influence on the fates of those who do make it to matric – depending on whether they do Higher or Standard Grade and whether they achieve an exemption or not. Research by Umalusi, the quality assurer in the General and Further Education and Training bands of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), confirmed the suspicion at the end of 2003 that the majority of students are now sitting for Standard Grade examinations, and writing examination papers whose quality has varied and in some cases declined over time.

historical precedents in the history and influence of the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) from 1918–1992 and of the South African Certification Council (SAFCERT) from 1992–2002.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the JMB established a process of setting and maintaining standards that included statistical standardisation processes from the 1960s. Its successor, SAFCERT, was established as a response to the education upheavals of 1976. Through it, the JMB also drove the centralisation of the standards control function, having unsuccessfully attempted a decentralised provincial model. Universities' participation in SAFCERT declined in this period. Statistical standardisation procedures were adjusted in such a manner as to support the view that homelands were working. Norms were defined, as they had been all along, according to the racial departments.

Since 1994, the terrain in which the matric examination has operated has changed substantially. Lolwane documents the curricular changes and how they began "percolating upward to the matric syllabi", influencing and

By Linda Chisholm



Matric is no longer serving the selection function for higher education that it did in the past

Johan Muller, School of Education at UCT, both questioned the potential elimination of differentiation within the examination altogether when the Higher and Standard Grade are dissolved and called for sensible and clear forms of grading and benchmarking.

Dr Mbithi wa Kivilu of the HSRC provided a salutary warning that if anyone was hoping that the FETC might solve the standards question, they might need to think again. For if there is one thing on which there is conclusive evidence in the literature, it is that, even within an outcomes-based understanding of standards, there is no one model standard. Ultimately, his paper showed, deciding on a standard is a matter of judgement and not of numbers and statistics.

Papers at the colloquium ranged from those that discussed policy issues relating to the matric and the move to the FETC, to those that analysed emerging trends in matric results and those that questioned the nature and purpose of matric. The papers provoked vigorous but constructive debate over its gate-keeping role, the reliability of the results, whether standards are falling or not, how reliable the matric is as a measuring tool, what in-depth analysis of the matric results over time shows us and whether and how the FETC will improve it or not. Underlying all this was a frank, critical discussion about outcomes-based education and its implications for assessment at the Grade 12 exit level. •

Professor Linda Chisholm is a Director in the Child, Youth and Family Development Research Programme.

MARKING MATRIC: the project

By Vijay Reddy

In January 2004, following the heated discussions about matric performance, education specialists at the HSRC came to the conclusion that the essence of the debate was whether the increased performance rate meant that the education system was improving, or not. And so a Matric Project was born. The purpose of this project was to, on an empirical basis, deepen the discussion around the matric examination and quality of the educational system.

The Matric Project has brought together research from five HSRC Research Programmes: Assessment Technology and Education Evaluation (the project home); Child, Youth and Family Development; Human Resource Development; Knowledge Management; and Surveys, Analyses, Modelling and Mapping.

We knew that a number of researchers were already working on the different questions about the matric. We saw it as timely to bring the work together through a colloquium. Of course, the question was asked, "why matric, as matric exams will be phased out in 2008 to make room for the Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC)?" Our response was that educational quality and a school-leaving examination would still be relevant in the new structure.

A colloquium, Marking Matric, was held in early November 2004 at the HSRC. The colloquium included participants from the National and Provincial Departments of Education, Umalusi, the HSRC and university researchers. Seventeen papers on different aspects of matric were offered.

The discussions were enlightening, lively and robust but not divisive. We recognised that participants came from different types of organisations with different responsibilities: some responsible for policies to ensure the delivery of quality education; some responsible for the implementation of policy while others had the luxury of criticising the system without the responsibility of managing it. But all participants recognised the importance of a collaborative, critical engagement to raise the relevant issues around the matric.

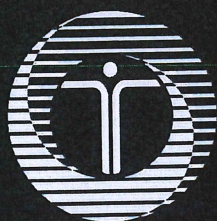
The papers from the Colloquium are being edited and published in a book: *Marking Matric: Proceedings of the HSRC Colloquium*, edited by Linda Chisholm and Vijay Reddy. This collection will be available at the end of February 2005. We hope that this collection contributes to deepening the discussion around quality of the educational system and the school-leaving certificate. •

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The **BIG CHANGEOVER DEBATE:**
From the Matric Certificate to the Further
Education and Training Certificate