

By Linda Chisholm

PUBLIC DEBATE LACKS QUALITY INFORMATION AND ANALYSIS

Minister Kader Asmal's announcement of a 73.3% pass rate in 2003 was the opening salvo of an Education Department celebrating ten years of democracy. It did not take long for the return volleys to be fired. As in previous years, the battle over matric condensed and conflated a range of different concerns. These related on the surface to matric and at deeper levels to the nature of the social order itself. The shape of the debate suggests an urgent need for more substantial research and analysis of the exam.

The annual disputes over the matric results consistently scandalise and shame the nation. In the early 1990s, stark differences in the achievements of black and white students called into question the nature of the matric exam as much as the inequalities within the wider society. Subsequent policy under Education Minister Bhengu moved to change the exam into year-mark and exam-mark components. In the mid-1990s, mismanagement of the exam drew attention not only to leaks of exam papers but also a perceived lack of discipline, order and control within newly established departments of education. Professor Kader Asmal, Minister of Education since 1999, initially focused on the re-establishment of order and discipline in the management of the examination. But in 2003 the public debate shifted ground to a concern with political manipulation of results and corresponding suspicion of public bodies entrusted with assuring quality and standards.

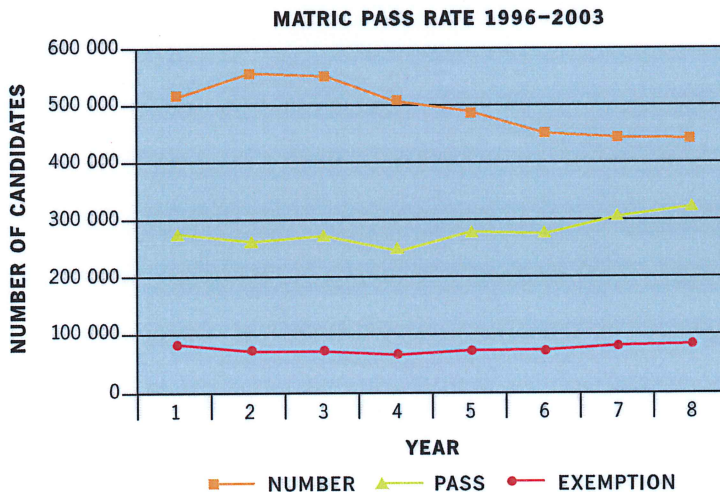
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Two issues remain constant: the political nature of the debate and the central position of 'standards', as if these are static and universal. There is something farcical to the debate when low pass rates are used at one time as testimony for poor standards and high pass rates are used at another as evidence for the same. Analysts tried, as in every year before, to separate the real issues from the emotional, the substance from the bluster. As in every year before, posturing and positioning

caught the public attention. But the analytical tools, quality and disaggregation of information were rarely subject to substantive analysis.

The main tool used in analysis of the matric exam is the pass rate. Complex analyses of the pass rate are rare. Most often, the change in percentage from one year to the next becomes a reason to celebrate or decry them. Historical perspective of any kind is almost always absent from the debate.

An analysis of trends rather than rates since 1996 does show that while the total number of candidates has declined, both the number passing and the number with exemption have risen:



If one takes the percentage increase from year to year, closer examination of the results over time reveals that 2003 was not the year in which changes were most dramatic. The percentage increase in passes from 2002 to 2003 is only 5.5% and the exemption pass increase is only 9.4%. The big percentage increase occurred in 2001. So from 2001 to 2002 it is 10.3% and 10.8% respectively. Cumulatively, from 2001 to 2003 the increases are 16.3% and 21.3% respectively. The 1996 and 2001 pass figures are basically the same with hardly any change in real numbers of passes or exemptions.

The key is the drastic drop in number of students writing which

produces the massive increase in pass rate disproportionate to the increase in numbers actually passing. This does not mean much until anecdotal stories about standards dropping are added; only then is there cause for concern. But we do not know if indeed they are.

The data does not tell us whether standards are dropping or not, or about the relationship of writing and passing on standard and higher

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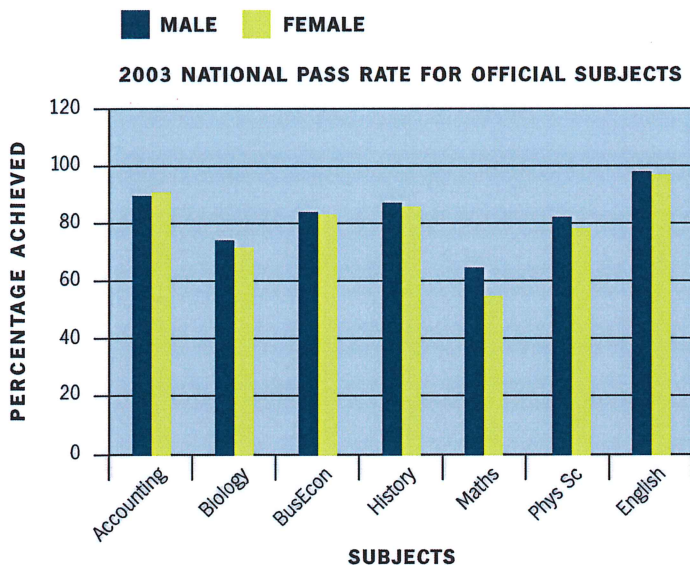
grade to the actual pass rate. This would, at the very least, need different kinds of research and analysis – of question papers over time and structural and cultural processes surrounding higher and standard grade choices and results.

More importantly, the available information is at too great a degree of generality to enable us to draw any firm, real conclusions about whether teaching and learning in schools overall has improved or deteriorated from one year to the next, let alone from one decade to the next.

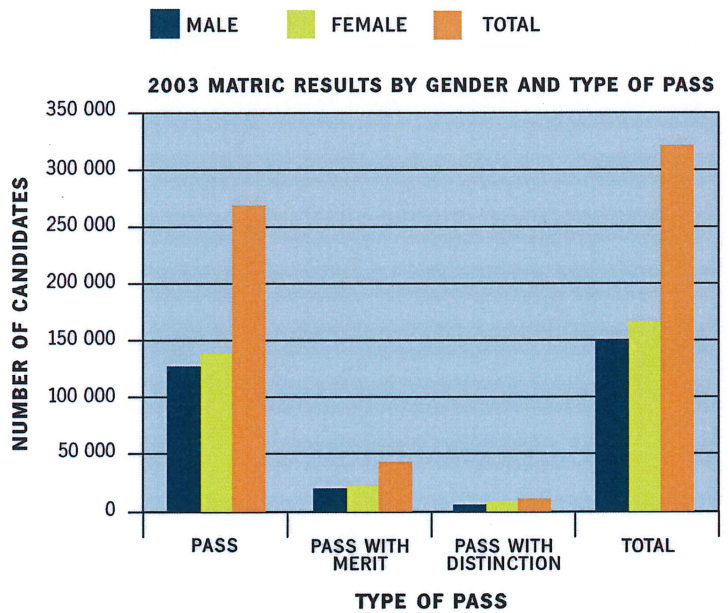
But how comparable is the information actually? Can we compare a matric based on an exam with a matric based on an exam and continuous assessment?

Can we compare results of exam papers that vary dramatically from year to year? In the US, the smallest change of a question in the SATS exam calls into question the comparability of results. Can we compare results when what is expected of students changes over time; when less emphasis is placed on recall and more on learning, understanding, problem-solving; and when question papers and what is being examined change?

Can we compare, given the complexity of the exam as a national exam and the differences between subjects and expectations over time in each? The amnesic ease with which South Africans use statistics that are questioned from year to year calls for further investigation.



The information provided by the Department in these annual debates is furthermore rarely opened up for further research and scrutiny. Take for example the case of results by gender. Slightly more girls than boys passed matric in 2003, and more girls passed with merit and distinction than boys. Does this mean the gender gap has closed? No: girls also achieved a few percentage points less than boys in official subjects excluding languages. This clearly needs much closer and deeper analysis.



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This example alone illustrates that the picture is much more complex than the national debate allows for, and that the information itself suggests questions for further analysis of who is achieving well and who is not and what is actually happening in schools.

Regardless of the ongoing annual discourse of derision, statistical realities or legitimacy of comparison from year to year, South Africans continue to want to use matric to pronounce on how well its school-leavers are doing and on how well the society is doing. The introduction of the Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) should improve on matric. But whether it will or not is currently open to debate. When it replaces matric, there are likely to be continuities and discontinuities in processes, results and debates. It is likely to continue to be a yardstick of performance under a different name. For these reasons, it is vital that there should be a more sustained engagement with the nature and quality of information and analysis in the public domain. •

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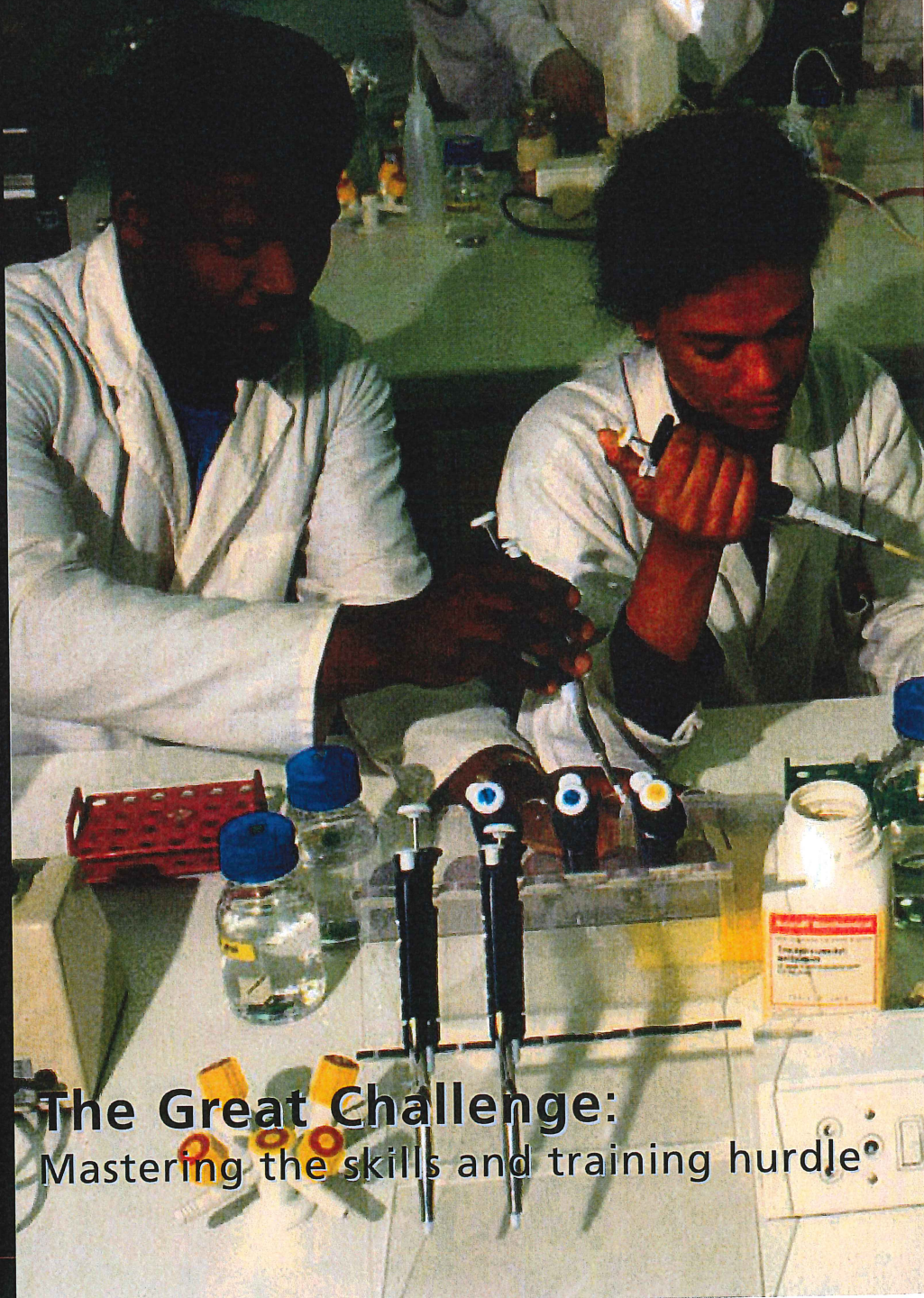
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The Great Challenge:
Mastering the skills and training hurdle