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Why Government Printing Works can't handle matric exam printing

The Department of Basic Education clarified the total cost for printing and packing question papers is R220m, not R3.6b as reported.



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 Photo for illustration purposes only.

The Education Department has clarified its costs and why it does not rely on the Government Printing Works (GPW) in Pretoria's CBD to service all matric learners nationwide with question papers

The clarification follows allegations by a media outlet that approximately eight provinces outsourced the printing of documents for matriculation processes to private printing companies rather than using the GPW.



The Department of Basic Education (DBE) states that printing October/November matric question papers costs around R220m. It added that Pretoria-based GPW is not ideally suited to print matric documents, as the arrangement is not convenient for other provincial education departments (PEDs) to access.

This is because GPW provides services to the entire government.

GPW is a government entity reporting to the Department of Home Affairs, specialising in secure printing of important national documents such as passports, visas, birth certificates, green ID books, smart card IDs, examination materials, and general government printing like stationery and government gazettes.

According to Basic Education spokesperson Elijah Mhlanga, the GPW's current capacity does not allow it to print secure question papers for all nine provincial education departments.

"This capacity can be extended over time, but the reality is that it's a major risk for all national question papers to be printed at one venue in the country."

Costs

Explaining the costs, Mhlanga said it costs the government between R3 800 and R4 000 per candidate writing seven subjects to administer the October/November National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations.

"In 2024, 727 121 full-time candidates are writing seven or more subjects. Multiplying the candidates by R4 000 brings the total to R2.9b.



"In addition, there are 155 215 part-time candidates writing one, two, three, or more subjects. Adding the R2.9b to the estimated cost for the part-time candidates, the total amounts to R3.6b.

"This is not just the cost of printing question papers, which is only one cost driver in the examination process."

The total estimated cost covers the following processes:

- Setting, moderation, and printing of question papers
- Transport and storage
- Security
- Marking, including remuneration for markers, accommodation, travel, meals, and venue costs
- Maintenance and enhancements to the Examination Computer system
- Printing and distribution of statements of results

Mhlanga stated that there was no national procurement directive compelling PEDs or the DBE to use GPW as the preferred provider.

"There is no national instruction issued to PEDs on who they should use as their service providers. PEDs are independent entities responsible for printing national question papers and follow the stipulated national procurement process to procure their own printing service provider.

"The DBE provides PEDs with the standard operating procedures for the printing and packing of question papers. The final choice of the printing service provider is up to the accounting officer," Mhlanga explained.

"One of the PEDs currently prints its NSC question papers with GPW due to a lack of in-house printing facilities, an arrangement in place for several years."

He said PEDs prefer in-house printing facilities, allowing them to manage the process more closely.

"Hence, printing at GPW in Pretoria is not the most convenient arrangement for most PEDs. In 2021, two additional PEDs printed their question papers at GPW. However, this remote management of printing and packing proved cumbersome and risky, leading them to revert to in-province arrangements for direct control."

Mhlanga noted that the department remains in continuous discussions with GPW to explore more extensive use of its services for question paper printing and is also investigating the digitalisation of



Shock

In a media statement, the Public Servants Association (PSA) expressed shock that Grade 12 question papers are being outsourced at a cost exceeding R2.6b, despite GPW's capability to handle this task

The PSA condemned the decision, questioning why the government would bypass its own institution, choosing private providers at high costs while frequently citing budget constraints for salary increases. This expenditure, it argued, raises concerns about fiscal responsibility and prioritising public funds.

"The decision was supposedly made to prevent paper leaks, which points to inefficiencies at GPW due to poor management. Funds allocated to this outsourcing could have enhanced educational infrastructure, retained essential teachers, and improved learning conditions. Instead, it seems to have created an opportunity to dip into public funds without a logical explanation for approving such high costs," the statement read.

The PSA has called for a forensic investigation into this matter.

The association urged the minister of Basic Education to be transparent with the public on the decision to outsource exam paper printing, providing reasons why GPW is not handling Grade 12 question papers.

"If there are control issues at GPW, incompetent managers must be replaced to prevent further waste of South African taxpayers' money," it said.



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