

Dropout rate: A big hole in South African Education system

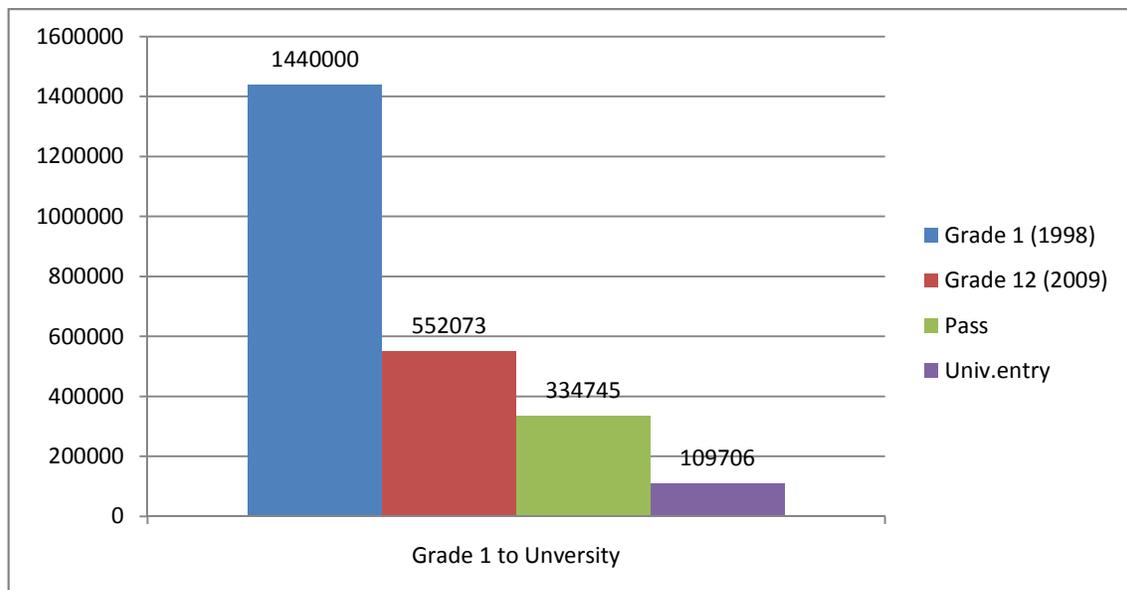
There is a big dark hole in the South African education system that continues to swallow many children. This hole manifests itself in the form of high dropout rates in both the schooling and tertiary education. Sadly, it undermines some of the most important gains of post-apartheid South Africa, including the broadening of access to education.

Indeed, South Africa seems poised to achieve the Millennium Development Goals on education by 2015. Government spending on education has increased by over 551 per cent between 1994 and 2012. This is an increase from R31.8 billion to R207 billion. Policies such as compulsory education for all children up to the age of 12, the no-fee schools, the feeding schemes and others, illustrate government commitment to universalise primary education.

Worrying dropout rate

However, the dropout rate in the schooling system is shocking. Investment in education has not been accompanied either by quantity or quality of output. Of the 1.4 million children who enrolled in grade 1 in 1998, only 552 000 made it to matric in 2009. This means close to a million children are swallowed into this big dark hole every year. As the graph hereunder shows, only 109 000 of learners who wrote matric qualified to study at university.

Graph 1: Progress rate from school to university in SA

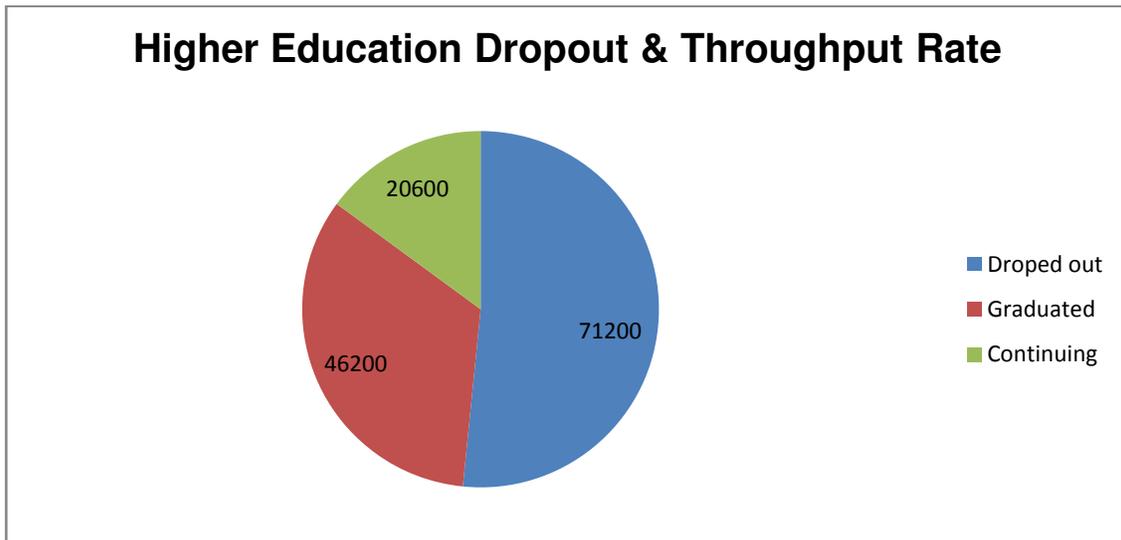


The poor results in matric are a reflection of the failures of our basic education. Such studies as the “Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study” continue to show that South Africa’s learners’ reading competencies are below the world’s averageⁱ.

In higher education, it is the same. The advent of democracy in 1994 led to the opening up of the doors of learning for more students in higher education. Enrolment at universities rose by 31 per cent in the period between 1995 and 2004.ⁱⁱ Between 2000 and 2009, it had increased from 588 000 to 837 635, respectively, with under graduates increasing from 456 000 to 684 000 in the same period.ⁱⁱⁱ

Low throughput rate

However, the throughput rates are disturbing. According to Higher Education South Africa, under one third (33.3 per cent) of students complete their studies in regulation time, while one in three students graduate within four years of studies. Higher education has a disturbing 52 per cent drop-out rate among students, which undermines the access gains of post-apartheid South Africa. Our graduation rate of 15 per cent is among the lowest in the world. As illustrated in the graph below, of the 139 000 students enrolled at our higher education institutions in 2002, only 33 per cent graduated on record time while 52 per cent fell through the cracks.



Although several reasons – including lack of financial support – have been advanced to explain the causes of high dropout rate at tertiary education, little attention has been paid to the role of primary and secondary education in preparing students for success in their tertiary education. The provision of quality primary and secondary education is a *sine qua non* for success at higher education level.

The burden of a weak schooling system

The large numbers of students who drop out in their first year of studies is due to the failure of the schooling system adequately to prepare them for tertiary education. Although students pass matric, the level of their cognitive development is far below the requirements of higher education institutions. This manifests itself painfully in their poor performance, and sadly in the high dropout rates.

To militate against this, most of our universities have developed bridging programmes, which have the effect of extending the duration of study by a year for most students. These desperate interventions often generate political criticism that universities enrol students longer than they should. Essentially, universities suffer the consequences of a weak schooling system.

Indeed, Acclaimed Pan-Africanist scholar Professor Ali Mazrui's observation was profound: "no university... can be a first class institution of learned enquiry if the training schools that feed into it are all mediocre."^{iv} His observation is apposite to the South African education crisis. Universities pay a heavy price for the failures of secondary and primary education. The schooling system churns out numbers of students who are not ripe for university education, thereby making it impossible for universities to meet the skills demands of the economy.

University students can't read and write

A 2009 study commissioned by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) to benchmark learner's readiness to study at university has found that there are very poor reading, writing and comprehension abilities amongst first-year students.^v

In terms of academic literacy, the study revealed that 47 percent of the students were proficient in English, the dominant language of higher education while 7 percent had only 'basic' academic literacy. Indeed, there is a link between academic performance and proficiency in the language of instruction.

With regard to what it takes to study first-year maths, the HESA study found only 7 percent of students to be proficient, and 73 percent only had intermediate skills and required assistance for them to pass, while 20 per cent had only the basic skills and required long term support if they were to continue with their studies. The findings of this study paint a picture of a poor education system that reproduces illiteracy. It casts doubts on the prospects of higher education to play a catalytic role in the economy.

The role of the PSA

Having understood the relationship between the failures of our tertiary education system and the poor quality of primary education, what then should be the Public Servants Association's (PSA) position towards the improvement of the education system?

In responding to this critical question, the PSA must reflect deeply on the approach it should take with regard to its interests as a union *vis-à-vis* those of society. We, the PSA, must as we always do, never find ourselves out of step with public sentiment. As a progressive union, we must associate ourselves with those who are committed to crafting a better future for South Africa's children. While worker solidarity must continue to be our guide, PSA must always show empathy for vulnerable children.

The need to restore the integrity of the teaching profession is more than obvious. As a profession, teaching must no longer be a last resort, but become a profession of choice for the young and talented in society. To do this, the PSA proposes that the system must be overhauled to acknowledge and incentivise those who do well. This must go beyond the current occupational specific dispensation (OSD for Educators). The details around the proposed remuneration system will shortly be provided in our proposals for the revised remuneration policy for public service.

The PSA must urge government to pay more attention to the foundation phase as it is the stage that makes the building stronger and resilient. The current state of Early Childhood Development, as the National Planning Commission (NPC) observed, is not ideal for the development of a good foundation for children. Among others, the NPC observed that “the quality of early childhood education and care for poor black communities is inadequate and generally very poor”; that it is “underfunded by government”; is “largely provided through support provided by donors to nongovernmental organisations”; and its “implementation lags behind,” especially in poorer communities.^{vi} All these are challenges that the PSA has to grapple with. In this regard, there has to be on-going, constructive engagement between our union and the Department of Basic Education, as well as other role players.

However, our collective efforts to improve the quality of education at foundation level must include the reprioritisation of reading, writing and arithmetic. Albeit that this cannot be achieved if government fails to perform its responsibilities. The Limpopo text book saga was a rude awakening that it is very costly for society completely to leave the education of its children to government. All stakeholders must at all times actively be involved.

What is beyond argument, though, is that the success of students at tertiary level is dependent on the quality of primary and secondary education they receive at tender age. Without a clear focus on improving quality at this level, dropout rates at tertiary education will continue to rise. Similarly, our failure to seal the leakage—high dropout rates—in our education system will continue to undermine the gains of post-apartheid South Africa.

References

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Council on Higher Education (HESA), *Higher Education Monitor: The state of Higher Education in South Africa*, No. 8, October 2009.
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- ^v Mazrui, A., 2005, “Pan Africansim and the intellectuals: Rise, Decline and Revival”, In Thandika Mkhandawire (eds), *African Intellectuals: Rethinking Politics, Language, Gender and Development*, Zed Books: New York.
- ^v Higher Education South Africa, “National Benchmark Tests Project”, June 2009.
- ^{vi} NPC, 2011, Diagnostic Overview, Pretoria: Presidency.