



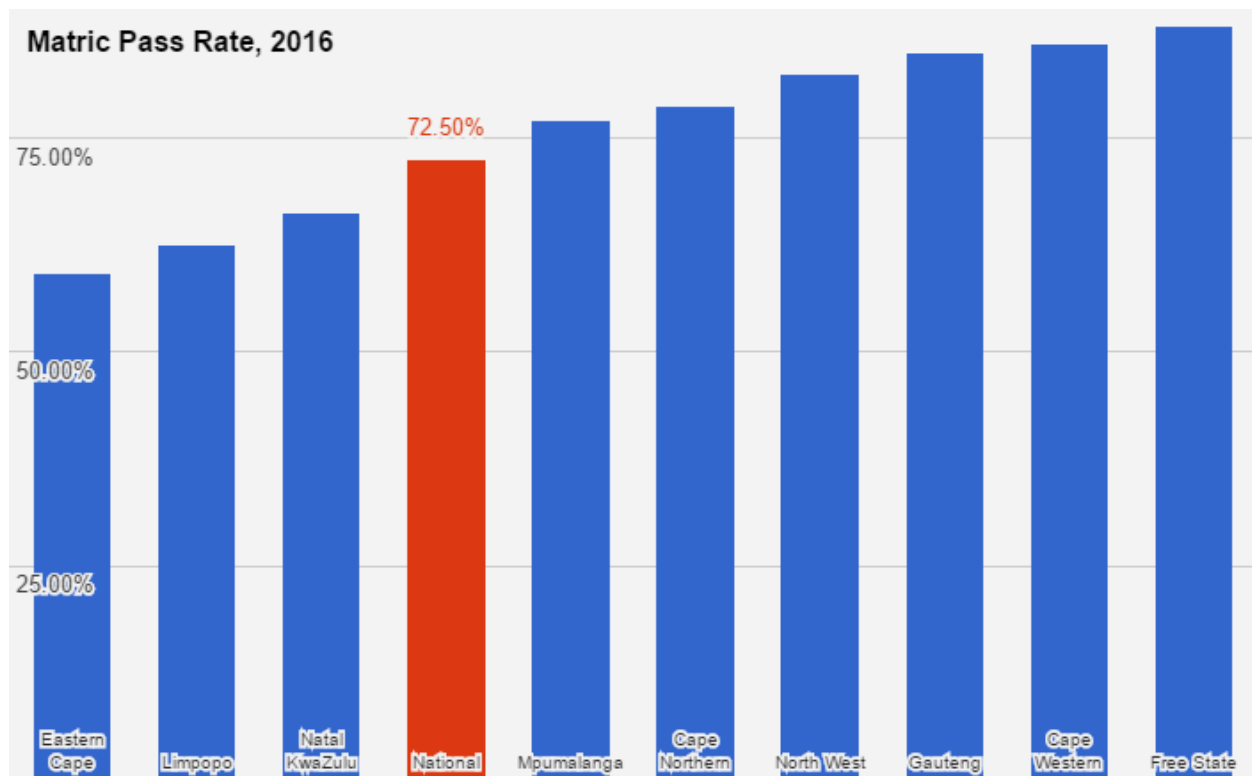
MATRIC RESULTS AND NATIONAL PROGRESS: THE FUTURE OF SOUTH AFRICA

If the graduating matrics of 2016 looked back on the twelve (or more) years of their schooling life, they would witness a country that has gone through tumultuous change. Those twelve years have witnessed three presidents, the largest financial crisis since the great depression of 1929, periods of economic boom (2004 - 2008) and bust (after 2008), a World Cup, the invention of new terms like 'State Capture' and 'Fees Must Fall', the rise of new technologies, the creation of entirely new professions (such as social media coordinator) and the end of old ones (encyclopedia salespeople are probably in short supply), not to mention hundreds of scandals and mini-crises in the broader political landscape.

Developing an education system that helps these learners is not a matter of momentary periods of coherence and delivery; it is a matter of confronting complexity and instability, and offering consistent service delivery. Building consistent high performance in our education system remains one of South Africa's most daunting challenges.

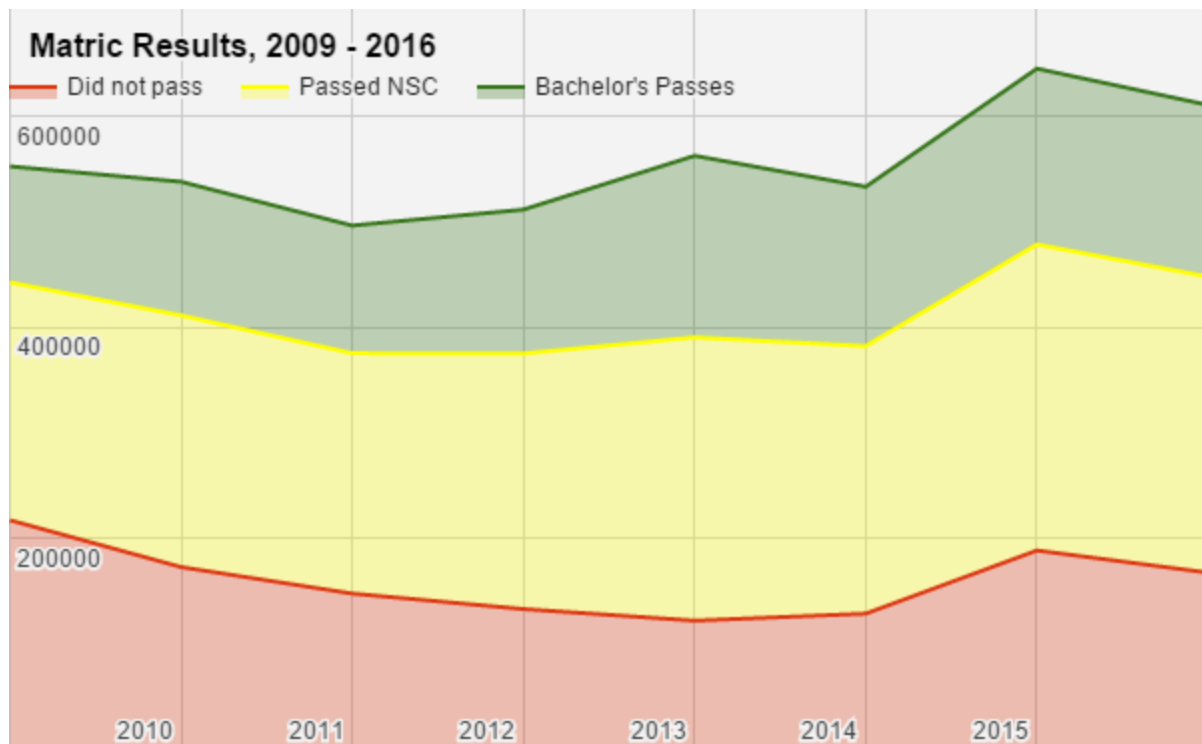
The results

Given all the instability, it is hard to evaluate the 2016 matric results, and attribute those results to specific successes and failures. The matric results of 2016 paint a moderately optimistic picture. The 2016 national pass rate sits at 72.5%, up from 70.7% in 2015. There was notable improvements in KZN, Limpopo and the Free State - with the latter posting the nation's highest pass rate, after years of struggles. Matric exemptions (bachelor's passes) were down in absolute terms, but up as a percentage of the matric body, with 26.6% of learners earning a bachelor's pass.



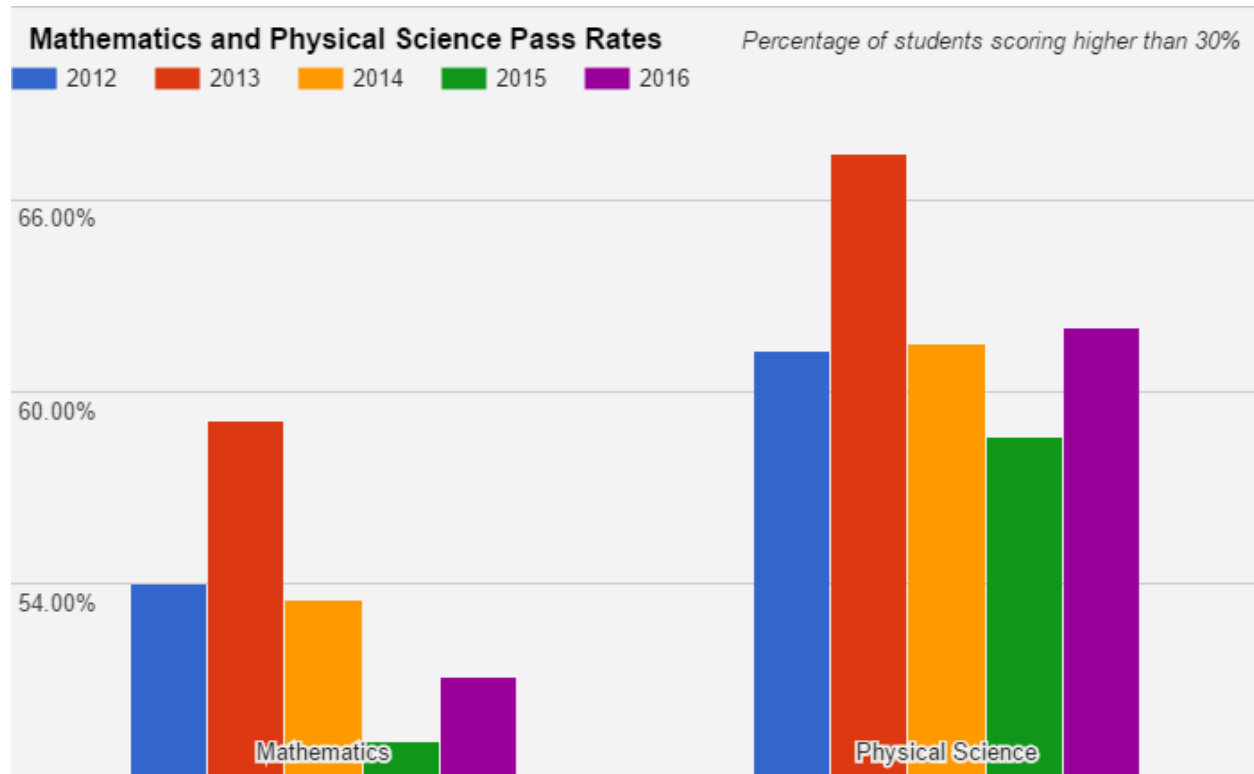
While these successes should be celebrated, it doesn't change the vexed problems in the schooling system - many of which lie hidden beneath the headline pass rate figure. There are four sets of bad news to cope with. First, pass rates are not translating into substantial expansions in access to university. Streaming of candidates into easier subjects and levels, outside the exemption track, combined with the lowering of the pass mark, have resulted in growing numbers of matric graduates facing an opportunity gap between them and the working world.

Second, drop-out rates remain a national emergency, with huge numbers of students never making it to matric in the first place. While it is difficult to interpret data on how a school cohort changes over time, some estimates put the drop-out rate at roughly 40%. At this rate, more than half of students will fail to receive a matric certification. High dropout rates throw a shadow on some of the stand out performances in 2016: the improving pass rates in the Free State and KwaZulu-Natal provinces are partly attributable to dropping participation rates - with 19,385 fewer students writing across the two provinces.



Third, performance in the crucial science and mathematics subjects - which are desperately needed in the economy and form vital bellwethers of the strength of the broader education system - remains poor. Even with an unusually low passing standard of 30%, only 51.1% (up from 49% the previous year) of students passed maths, and 62% passed physical science. As can be seen in Figure 3, there has been little trend in progress for science, while maths results seem to be regressing.

Fourth, matric results remain the primary metric by which the government assesses educational outcomes, but by other, internationally comparable metrics, the country fares terribly. South Africa ranks second to last of the 57 countries ranked by the OECD's Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the gap is huge. Top ranked Singapore had 80% of its population scoring above the high 550 mark, whereas only 2% of South Africa's achieved this level. The message from these scores are clear: South Africa's education system is not internationally competitive.



None of the above is new. If you changed the dates and numbers, you could reuse the same two paragraphs above for the last decade. The poor results will be met with the same notes of improvement from the Department of Basic Education, and the same outrage by critics, while the usual suspects (DBE, SADTU and teachers themselves) will be blamed. What is perhaps even more worrying about this consistent chorus of outrage, is the creeping complacency in addressing what is an ever-present national crisis. With a pile up of more crises, such as #FeesMustFall or chronic unemployment, capturing the limelight, it's easy to forget that they have their roots in the education system. Under prepared university students are more likely to spend longer than three-years getting a degree, or may never manage to, increasing the costs of university and undermining loan systems such as NSFAS. The education crisis lies at the roots of so many key problems in South Africa, and must be tackled at source.

What is to be done?

There are no simple solutions on the table. Changes will happen slowly, and in the face of such a complex problem, they will be unpredictably applied. But four changes are worth considering.

First, is to realise and address the fact that the biggest problem in South Africa's education system lies outside the education system. There is extensive evidence to suggest that education performance is strongly correlated to parental income, family structure, parental education, housing, health care, access to food and a wide range of other social factors that constitute social barriers to effective learning for a black child growing up in the township or rural village. Very often, the performance of the education system is a reflection of

the sense of justice, fairness, and cohesiveness of the broader society. To build a competitive education system requires overcoming the social challenges that afflict South Africa. This has a number of implications. First, it means that often interventions may be needed outside the education system. Programmes that inform parents on how to assist their children with homework, or that provide food and support to students, may be as important as a working school system.

Second, more stability in the education system is needed. An education system that is stable - without rapid curriculum changes or more teaching systems - will allow social capital to develop around education. This may take the form of friends and family members being able to offer help with homework, or it might take the form of community centres that understand how to help. Either way, a strained society needs to be given the time to develop the structures necessary to facilitate education. The pipeline for teacher training needs to be strengthened and broadened.

The training system is the key leverage point to close gaps in teacher knowledge. And yet the system has a number of problems, many stemming from the historic closing of teacher training colleges. This include problems of access to universities, problems of adequate funding for universities, and the risk of centralising educational talent around the cities that have universities. Ensuring that education campuses remain well resourced, and impart both skills and a sense of purpose to teachers is vital to the stability of the rest of the system.

Third, regardless of how successful those interventions are, teachers will need ongoing training and assistance to maintain a level of knowledge and keep up to date with changing teaching methods. This will only be able to be achieved by ongoing-education, which itself will require constant monitoring and evaluation of teacher performance. These performance management techniques are, of course, incredibly controversial. This skepticism has deep historical roots, in the monitoring of the apartheid state, but also has very real world concerns, notably concerns that teachers will get blamed for the poor performance of underserved schools and students struggling against deep challenges. The debacle around the Annual National Assessments (ANA) was well justified, with the tests having deep problems, but it shouldn't detract from the fact that an alternative secondary assessment system is desperately needed. Such a system would facilitate ongoing teacher improvement, while also allowing the DBE to identify problems before students reach matric. A strong commitment by the Department that assessment will be used to help teachers, rather than punish them, could go a long way to smoothing the path to improved monitoring systems.

Fourth, there are a couple of core interventions that can be done outside of government intervention. A key actor here are teacher unions. Unions are often blamed for the impasse in advancing new teacher monitoring systems or improving accountability for teachers. However, traditionally speaking, unions have played a vital role in bolstering the performance of teachers and the education system as a whole. Core to this has been unions' crafting and advancing their own vision of pedagogy. There is a long and proud history of South Africa's teacher unions crafting pedagogical visions in defiance of incredibly difficult circumstances,

carving out a vision for teaching in the context of the oppression of apartheid and the resistance of the struggle. A similar vision must be created for the struggles of a post-apartheid society. Creating an ongoing discourse on the pedagogy of education in modern South Africa would offer a forum to share ideas, a set of approaches that can help teachers in dire circumstances - and a vision for how to move past out of the education crisis.

When everything is said and done, let us celebrate matric results in the knowledge that they are not the be-all of South Africa's education system. They are a vital part of a system that needs serious overhaul.