

# The many wrongs of the right to education

 By Jackie Carroll

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Human Rights Day offers us the chance to assess the Constitution. It's a day on which we consider whether this pioneering document is living up to its promises, weighing up the ways in which it is serving us and the ways in which it is failing. An evaluation of the Constitution's right to education reveals stark results. It is a difficult report card to read.



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## Quantity, quality and the perils of their imbalance

In recent years, the government has taken important strides in improving South Africa's education system, of that there is no doubt. Significant funding has been allocated to ensuring improved access, and to good effect: there are more children in school now than ever before. More learners are graduating with a matric, too. For the past eight years, the National Senior Certificate pass rate has consistently stayed above the 70% mark. At 78.2%, the 2018 pass rate was 3.1% higher than that of 2017.

But these numbers belie the realities on the ground. With many schools still battling inadequate teacher training, infrastructure, resources and technology, the rise in the number of learners has had an impact on the quality of education they receive. And while more learners are leaving with a matric, this has been fuelled by subject choices and the adjustment of standards that leave them lacking in the knowledge and skills they need to enter tertiary institutions or the formal economy.

To graduate with a higher certificate – the lowest matric level – learners only need to obtain 40% in their home language, 40% in two other subjects, and 30% in four other subjects. The government has also recently announced the possible introduction of a fourth level, a General Education Certificate. This below-Grade 12 qualification is intended to facilitate the move between school and college. In reality, it might further inhibit learners with another poorly regarded piece of paper.

## Perceptions and misconceptions

In this quantity-over-quality environment where standards are arguably being compromised, the value of the South African matric qualification has been compromised for some time. Today, many companies are reluctant to accept a matric at face

value. Literacy and numeracy assessments are becoming common components of recruitment and screening processes. Universities have been running these assessments among applicant first-year students for years.

But there are alternatives to a matric, and the formal economy is largely at fault for failing to recognise their value. The National Qualifications Framework's Level 4 is one such equivalent qualification, as are various technical N courses. In many sectors, these certificates are of greater relevance as they include practical experience. Businesses whose entry requirements simply stipulate the need for a matric rule out applicants with worthwhile alternatives in hand.



## Unhappy with your matric results? Here's what you can do

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## The right to a basic education, including adult basic education

The provision of adult basic education is carefully enshrined in Section 29 of the Constitution. But those who don't manage to complete matric are in a worse position than those who do. Adults trying to achieve the equivalent of a Grade 9 qualification or higher are referred to adult education and training (AET) colleges, as mandated above. These colleges, however, rarely have the funding they need to be effective. Many battle with lack of infrastructure and face continuous evictions, have insufficient and out-of-date resources, and depend on minimal access to teachers.

These adult learners also tend to be caught between the budgetary and bureaucratic spats that take place between the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Higher Education. While a matric qualification is the responsibility of the former, AET learners technically fall under the latter. As each department tries to relinquish custody, many learners simply fall through the cracks.

## Righting the wrongs

The government is not unaware of the challenges at hand. Of the six thematic areas the Department of Basic Education addresses in its work, five deal with improving quality. There are plans underway to reinvent community colleges and to provide additional support to the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions that equip students with useful skills.

As these efforts continue, dialogue between education institutions (both secondary and tertiary), government, and the formal economy also needs to be improved. Are there learners who would benefit from a matric alternative? These learners need to be guided on their options. Are there technical positions that corporate is struggling to fill? This information should be filtered to schools, community colleges and TVETs.

In addition, subject choice counselling needs to be improved at Grade 9 level, at the point where learners are selecting the

subjects that will either broaden or limit their tertiary and employment opportunities. By the time many learners reach matric, they are stuck with subjects in which they either have no aptitude or no interest – the economic consequences of this are real and dire.

The intentions are there, and the plans are in place. All that remains is to invest in and implement the strategies and systems that have already been developed. The goal post shifting that has defined the past few years is preventing any goals being scored for the Constitutional rights of our children.

## ABOUT JACKIE CARROLL

Jackie Carroll is the CEO and co-founder of Media Works, South Africa's leading provider of adult education and training for over 21 years.

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