

# We must dig a little deeper than the matric pass rate

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EVERY year there is a big song and dance about the matric exams, followed by a cycle of celebrations and flagellations from the Department of Basic Education and the media respectively.

The minister announces whether the pass rate went up or down, which province came out on top, and so on, as if these were the things to focus on. Members of the public interpret the increases or decreases as signs that things are getting better or worse, as if the matric pass rate were the best barometer of our schooling system. It isn't.

In addition to the raw pass rate we should also be looking at the throughput pass rate — how many learners in a cohort reach and pass matric — as well as results from international assessments at earlier grades.

Before showing the links between gatekeeping and pass rates in matric, it is worth emphasising that most indicators do actually show genuine improvements across the sector. The minister should be congratulated for that.

The recent Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study showed that, while

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our Grade 9 students still have very low levels of mathematics and science knowledge, those levels have improved

considerably over the last 12 years. At the matric level, the 2016 Education Sector Review published by the department, the most authoritative account of progress on key education indicators, shows a consistent increase in the absolute number of young people attaining matric.

About 56% of the cohort now passes matric, up from 49% in 2014. This is not smoke and mirrors — these are genuine and significant achievements.

Yet as a country we still choose to focus myopically on the matric pass rate and which province is at the front of the pack. When I heard that the Free State and the Northern Cape had the largest increases in their matric pass rates (seven and nine percentage points increases, respectively), my first question was: “But did they hold back more weaker students than last year?”

So let's see what the numbers

say. Does there seem to be a relationship between the number of Grade 12s writing matric between 2015 and 2016 and a change in the pass rate over the two years?

Of the two provinces with the largest increases in matric pass rates — the Northern Cape (nine percentage points increase) and the Free State (seven percentage points increase) these are also the two provinces with the largest percentage decrease in the number of students writing matric (relative to the previous year). Both had 14% fewer matrics in 2016 compared to 2015.

And the only two provinces whose matric pass rates went down (Mpumalanga and Limpopo) were also the only two provinces whose number of matrics did not decrease relative to last year.

So essentially we see provinces with lower numbers of matrics

(relative to the previous year) having the largest increases in matric pass rates.

This is not a coincidence. The more provinces practise gatekeeping, the higher will be their pass rate (artificially so).

The biggest declines in the number of students writing matric in 2016 were associated with the biggest increases in the pass rate (compared to 2015). Essentially, the more gatekeeping, the higher the pass rate. This is unlikely to be a coincidence.

When thinking about the matric results, we would all do well to dig a little deeper than the matric pass rate — and soon we would realise that promising (or precarious) pathways are set in place in primary school, not matric.

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