

# The 1997 matric results

---

By Alvan Riley, General Manager, Training and Education, NPI

---

**T**he recently-announced 1997 matric results are, as so many commentators have stated, truly calamitous.

Blame is being laid and, no doubt, remedial action will be announced. The NPI, in association with the Centre for Productive Education (CPE), wishes to offer a rational perspective on this highly-politicised subject.

The essential questions, and our considered answers, are:

- ☐ Are the results really serious?  
*Yes, they truly are.*
- ☐ Is the performance of our schools and pupils getting worse?  
*Probably not.*
- ☐ What kind of action will have the greatest impact on future performance?  
*Improvement in primary school teaching.*

## Are the results really serious?

It is widely accepted that the formation of human capital is now, and increasingly will be, the most decisive factor that drives economic growth and our standard of living. If we want a higher standard of living in a competitive world, we need to be relatively good at human capital formation.

The outcomes of our new outcomes-based education system would adequately describe, qualitatively, the kind of human capital a modern economy needs.

Matric examinations, while they may be imperfect as a valid indicator of educational accomplishments, are reasonable approximations in assessing the stage of human capital formation of our 18 year-olds.

If, as happened last year, more than half of the candidates who sat the examinations, failed to obtain a school-leaving certificate, then it is a reasonable assumption that these students will have great difficulty in contributing to a modern knowledge-based society, and that our rate of appropriate human capital formation is substantially below its potential.

A performance of 47,1% school leaving certification, repeated annually, would guarantee a substantially lower standard of living for almost all South Africans for a very long time.

Economically, the 1997 matric results are another step to oblivion. These results have to be improved.

## Are the 1997 results worse than previous years?

Are these results worse or just another step of the same magnitude on the journey to oblivion?

Researcher, Dr Calitz, provides valuable data (*Sunday Times*, 11/1/98), which shows that as the proportion of matric candidates from former Department of Education and Training (DET) schools increases, so the matric failure rate increases.

Why should this be the case? In our

view, the most obvious implication of the trend Dr Calitz has identified is the generalisation that current black matriculants did not enjoy the same quality of primary education as that traditionally afforded to white pupils. They were less well-prepared for secondary education and, consequently, do less well in the matric examinations.

This point is underlined by a World Bank policy paper (1990): "Poor primary schools compromise the entire system for human capital development. They produce graduates (pupils) who are poorly prepared for *secondary* and tertiary education and ill-equipped for *lifelong learning*."

The consequence is an insufficient number of truly educated managers, workers, and parents who can efficiently contribute to development" (our italics).

In the opinion of the NPI and the CPE, the root cause of the bad 1997 matric results lies in the quality of primary school education. Improvements at that level drive improvements in human capital formation.

To blame parents, 'lazy' teachers or school management, although such criticisms can reasonably be made, is incidental. The core issue is the unpreparedness of children for secondary education and, beyond that, all life's learning necessities.

#### **What kind of action will have the greatest impact on future performance?**

Having said all this, we need to take action on behalf of the current casualties.

Action needs to be taken in three areas:

- ☐ prioritise primary school education;

- ☐ more warning signs or indicators over a lot shorter period than the current 11 years;
- ☐ a rehabilitation plan for those who are out of school and are virtually unemployable.

#### **Primary school education**

There are many talented people struggling with improvements in this area. There are also good theoretical and pragmatic grounds for knowing how to transform the abilities of our young children. There is, however, no certain model for transformation that assures success; there is no quick fix.

We need, and we have them, people who can extend the base of intelligence, sensitivity and open-minded enquiry in all of us: parents, students, school managers and educational administrators, to such an extent that primary school education in South Africa is improved.

The NPI/CPE alliance will work with anyone committed to transforming primary school education.

#### **More warning signs**

In the past, we had external examinations at Sub B, Standards 2, 6 and Standard 9. This would enable us to evaluate education standards and take corrective action at much shorter intervals. Maybe these are too many evaluations, but there should be external examinations at least at Grades 7 and 10.

#### **Rehabilitation plan**

Clearly something drastic needs to be done for the pupils who are out of school and virtually unemployable because they have failed matric. This issue should surely be given priority on the agenda for the planned Jobs Summit.