

REVIEW | Broadening the base for opportunity: A second chance for young people without matric

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Introduction

Despite hopes to the contrary, South Africa has become a more unequal society since the demise of apartheid. In spite of the many interventions that the government has rolled out for the poor, such as social grants, subsidised water and electricity, housing, public health and free school education, inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, has continued to grow (Bosch et al. 2010).

What most of these interventions have in common is an emphasis on the redistribution of resources. While they are important within a context of inherited resource inequality, they cannot be implemented at the cost of an emphasis on the redistribution of opportunities. Over the past decade, some emerging economies, particularly those in Latin America, which share a history of inequality, have reaped the benefits of a growing focus on the latter by purposefully channelling opportunities towards the more disadvantaged sections of society (De Barros et al. 2009).

The principle of equal opportunity to level the playing field is, firstly, a more sustainable approach, and, secondly, a more appealing longer-term proposition to address income inequalities in contexts where high levels of emotive contestation exist around ownership of resources. De Barros et al. (2009) share this sentiment, arguing that although most people decry unequal outcomes, fewer are proactive in searching for ways to overcome unequal opportunities that give certain segments of a society a head start over others.

Access to opportunity works towards levelling the playing field, as it provides tools for social mobility. In other words, having opportunities in life prepares people for accessing further opportunities that provide social mobility. Hodge (1979) also views social mobility as a critical social mechanism, which contributes to a stable body politic. Social mobility, whether it occurs in small steps or great leaps, provides a measure of the gap between the social origins and social destinations of individuals. When the ultimate gap is small for those who start from a position of disadvantage, achievement reached reflects opportunities given and taken along the way, and thus provides the measure of mobility possible for individuals.

Education is one of the primary social resources offering

opportunity to individuals. Consequently, most countries strive to provide their citizens with access to education in order to enhance the quality of their citizenship, but also to provide a platform for social mobility. A distinctive feature that separates developed from developing societies is the extent to which such opportunity is extended to individuals. Frequently, developing countries limit this opportunity to a few years of mostly primary education.

The argument presented here is that such approaches are short-sighted, particularly in a country like South Africa, where social mobility is limited by insufficient education, which, in turn, exacerbates existing levels of inequality. This article, thus, underscores the importance of completion of senior secondary education, which is a gateway to opportunities for individuals, especially those coming from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

Passing the national senior certification examination, or 'matric' as it is known in South Africa, has become the minimum requirement for a better future for many young people and their families, who struggle at great expense to obtain this qualification. Due to various social and political reasons, this key to a better life becomes more elusive if learners do not succeed at their first attempt, because the education system offers little opportunity for second chances. After a brief discussion of the importance of senior secondary education, we look at the patterns and reasons for non-completion of senior secondary schooling in South African schools. From here, we proceed to explore the progression options that are available for young people without 'matric'. This is followed by a discussion of the viability of these options and the implications of their implementation.

The importance of senior secondary education

Secondary education serves as a link between schooling and work, work-preparedness and higher education. Given that labour markets, in both South Africa and the rest of the world, have become more predisposed towards skilled workers in recent decades, there has been a corresponding requirement

regarding the capacity of education systems to produce larger numbers of skilled labour market entrants. In a context where post-secondary qualifications are increasingly in demand, a secondary education has become the absolute minimum requirement for those who want to improve their livelihoods through employment (Levy & Murnane 2004).

Secondary education is not only important as a necessary acquisition for trainability, it is also at this level that young people consolidate the disciplinary knowledge that guides them through their professional lives. Young (2007) regards the imparting of such disciplinary knowledge as one of the main functions of schools, and argues that it is this element of education, more than attendance, that has the capacity to equalise unequal societies. He is convinced that the acquisition of this 'powerful knowledge' enables children from disadvantaged backgrounds to move, intellectually at least, beyond their local and particular circumstances. Townsend and Dougherty (2006) also advance this argument, and regard disciplinary knowledge as a critical requirement for adapting to an increasingly knowledge-based global economy.

The provision of universal secondary education has been a common denominator amongst countries that have experienced economic booms in recent years. Brazil, which has experienced concurrent economic growth and a decline in its high inequality levels, provides one such example. Prior to its growth phase, many of its citizens were unskilled and poorly educated, which translated into highly differential pay scales. Economic growth coincided with an improvement in education, because the country's expanding welfare system attached conditionalities, such as completion of senior secondary schooling, to government support of poor households (De Moura Castro 2012a). Such measures contributed to the narrowing of inequality in Brazilian society, and produced sufficient skills for a rapidly expanding economy. Korea, once one of the world's poorest nations, offers another example of where educational development has been tied to economic development, allowing the country to shift its industrial base from heavy, capital-intensive industries to a knowledge-intensive economy (Sang-Hoon 2011; Young-Chu 2011; Young-Hyun 2011). The universalising of tertiary education, which provided the foundation for this transition, was predicated on an already universalised secondary education system.

Senior secondary schooling in South Africa

South Africa presents us with a complex range of contradictory scenarios in its school education system. To start with, the country bears the legacy of extreme inequality and, hence,

the driving force behind most of the post-apartheid state's programmes has been to erase this legacy. In the past 18 years, the state has taken lengthy strides in making school education more accessible to children. The country has not only expanded education provision, but has also been able to obtain what Holsinger and Cowell (2000) consider to be a precursor of successful massification of schooling, namely the adoption of a widespread cultural commitment to education. When the new government took office, the education cause was boosted immensely by the 'back to school' calls made by former President Mandela. Millions of students responded and enrolled *en masse*. Enrolment and retention numbers have continued to increase steadily, according to a recent study of the survival and drop-out rates in the country's 12-grade school system (Nyanda et al. 2008).

Further evidence of increased school participation and improved secondary schooling outcomes emerges from trend studies of the senior certificate examinations, which serve as the admission requirement for enrolment in the higher education system. The enrolment numbers for this examination have been increasing steadily, and the pass rates climbed from 47 per cent in 1997 to 73 per cent in 2003. In subsequent years, this figure dropped to the 60 per cent range, but increased again to 70 per cent in 2011 (Naidoo 2006; DBE 2012). Apart from a few exceptions in recent years, the number of students sitting for the senior certificate has increased, as is shown in Table 3.1.2. When the present government assumed office in 1994, the duration of compulsory education was pegged at nine years. This decision was informed largely by international practice, with developed countries making education available and compulsory until the age of 15 or 16 years (NEPI 1992). The structuring of school education into a system that distinguishes between basic, compulsory education, on the one hand, and senior secondary education, on the other, was a pragmatic consideration, given that the new government could not guarantee a budget able to accommodate 12 years of equitable education. Today, 18 years later, it is clear that the lower threshold of nine years has become a significant barrier hindering young people from becoming productive citizens (NYC 2008; Altman & Marock 2008). Altman and Marock (2008), for example, show that those who do not complete their senior secondary schooling or access higher education are the most vulnerable and their chances of being employed are greatly reduced. We have already demonstrated above that although the numbers are high for students who proceed beyond Grade 9, qualitative throughputs are still very small.

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Senior secondary completion

As indicated above, the issue of access is one of the lesser problems of the South African education system. More challenging is the question of learner retention, which becomes most pronounced after Grade 9. As Table 3.1.1 shows, the drop-out rate below Grade 9 is statistically insignificant, but then increases sharply from Grade 10 to 12.

Completion rates of the secondary education system can be measured in two ways: either by looking at the pass rate at the end of the schooling system (Grade 12) or by looking at the survival rates of the same cohort at the end of Grade 12. Table 3.1.2 reflects the first method for senior certificate pass rates between 1991 and 2011.

It can be seen from Table 3.1.2 that even though the matric pass rates have been improving, the composite pass rate masks other details in the system. For example, the growing number of matric candidates has resulted in increasing numbers of those who obtain this qualification (in relation to the numbers who enrol for this examination). We do not know why there has been a drop in students who actually enrol for this examination. We can speculate that there might be

Table 3.1.1: Survival and drop-out rates of the 1980–1984 birth cohort, aged 23–27 years in 2007

Grade	Mean survival rate*	Drop-out rate
Grade 1	984	0.2%
Grade 2	982	0.4%
Grade 3	979	0.7%
Grade 4	972	1.2%
Grade 5	960	1.7%
Grade 6	944	2.8%
Grade 7	917	4.8%
Grade 8	873	7.0%
Grade 9	811	11.5%
Grade 10	717	16.1%
Grade 11	602	24.2%
Grade 12	456	

Source: DoE (2009)
Note: * Calculated per thousand of birth groups

Table 3.1.2: Senior certificate, numbers passing and pass rate, 1991–2011

Year	Total candidates	Total passes	Percentage total passes	Endorsement passes	Percentage endorsement passes	Total failures	Percentage failures
1991	409 076	216 147	52.8	70 318	17.2	192 929	47.2
1992	447 904	243 611	54.4	73 328	16.4	204 293	45.6
1993	470 948	239 556	50.9	67 915	14.4	231 392	49.1
1994	495 408	287 343	58.0	88 497	17.9	208 065	42.0
1995	531 453	283 742	53.4	78 821	14.8	247 711	46.6
1996	518 032	278 958	53.8	79 768	15.4	239 074	46.2
1997	555 267	261 399	47.1	69 007	12.4	293 867	52.9
1998	553 151	279 986	50.6	71 808	13.0	273 165	49.4
1999	511 159	249 831	48.9	63 725	12.5	261 328	51.1
2000	489 941	283 294	57.8	68 626	14.0	206 004	42.0
2001	449 371	277 206	61.7	67 707	15.1	172 126	38.3
2002	443 821	305 774	68.9	75 048	19.9	137 991	31.1
2003	440 267	322 492	73.2	82 010	18.6	117 604	26.7
2004	467 985	330 717	70.7	85 117	18.2	137 173	29.3
2005	508 363	347 184	68.3	86 531	17.0	160 996	31.7
2006	528 525	351 503	66.5	85 830	16.2	177 022	33.5
2007	564 775	368 217	65.2	85 454	15.1	196 558	34.8
2008	533 561	333 604	62.5	107 274	20.1	199 817	37.5
2009	552 073	334 718	60.6	109 697	19.9	217 355	39.4
2010	537 543	364 513	67.8	126 371	23.5	173 030	32.2
2011	496 090	348 114	70.2	120 767	24.3	147 976	29.8

Source: DoE (2009); DBE (2009, 2011)

Table 3.1.3: Not employed, not in education, not severely disabled, 18–24-year age group, 2007

Education level	Age							Total
	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
Unspecified	2 595	2 457	3 786	4 762	4 998	4 054	4 595	27 351
Primary or less	61 056	64 285	70 496	78 564	73 575	75 261	77 425	500 662
Secondary education less than Grade 10	51 192	59 643	73 194	79 050	83 367	81 502	80 699	508 597
Grade 10 or higher but less than Grade 12	65 228	94 608	132 158	164 596	176 733	174 325	183 146	990 794
Grade 12/NTCIII (no exemption)	47 447	65 190	89 292	99 797	100 711	96 139	100 080	598 657
Grade 12 (with exemption)	10 226	13 526	14 778	14 259	16 910	13 869	14 766	98 335
Certificate with Grade 12	2 732	4 025	6 229	8 157	9 672	8 340	7 811	47 035

Source: Adapted from Cloete (2009); Stats SA (2007)

changes in the numbers of young people who are at school, due to decreasing birth rates. At the same time, the numbers of those who obtain a certificate that qualifies them for university admission have remained constant, leaving a growing number of certificated individuals who have very few options to access work or further learning. Although the number of students who fail completely has been decreasing, the students who do not qualify for degree study or 'endorsements' are not significantly better off than those who fail, as further opportunities for them are limited.

The data reflected in Table 3.1.3 show that the number of young people without matric, or with a low-pass matric has been growing over the years, and constitutes approximately 41 per cent of the NEET (not in education, employment or training) group. In the light of this, Cloete (2009) contends that the two 'worst' things that can happen to a young person are either to drop out of school between Grade 10–12, or to get a national senior certificate that does not allow access to degree study. This, unfortunately, is the reality for the majority of young South Africans. Only a small minority completes high school with a degree-accessing senior certificate that allows them to proceed to higher education.

Table 3.1.4 illustrates a very disturbing trend of severe attrition, with the survival rate of cohorts between Grade 3 and 12 just above 40 per cent. Since the focus here is on completion rates for Grade 12, we will be honing in on the drop-out rates and failures in this grade and try to establish the possible causes. Firstly, we look at patterns of passes and drop-outs nationally (see Figure 3.1.1).

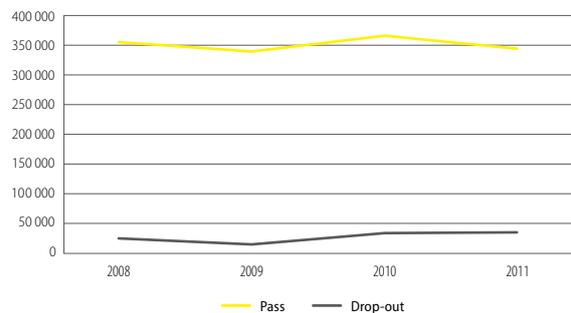
It is clear that while large numbers of learners enrol at the beginning of each year, many do not proceed to write the examination, and explanations for this have to be found. Figure 3.1.1 shows that in 2010 and 2011, there was a substantial increase on the number of drop-outs at this level. Reasons for this have not been researched yet, but it should be a serious concern to all involved with education in this country. Where do these young people disappear to? What

Table 3.1.4: Senior certificate completion rate, 1995–2007

Year	Grade 3	Grade 7	Grade 9	Grade 11	Grade 12
1995	97%	88%	75%	54%	39%
1997	97%	89%	75%	51%	37%
1999	98%	90%	76%	54%	41%
2001	99%	90%	77%	57%	42%
2002	99%	91%	79%	55%	40%
2003	99%	92%	79%	57%	42%
2004	99%	92%	82%	56%	42%
2005	99%	93%	81%	57%	42%
2006	99%	93%	82%	58%	43%
2007	99%	93%	83%	60%	43%

Source: DoE (2009)

Figure 3.1.1: Grade 12 passes and drop-outs nationally, 2008–2011



Source: Statistics provided by Umalusi (Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training), 2012

prospects are there for them with this level of education?

When we analyse the data in further detail, in per school quintiles, we find that the lower quintiles have much higher drop-out numbers than do the higher quintiles, and this situation has not been improving in the lowest quintile.

Quintile 1 represents the schools in the poorest economic communities, while quintile 5 represents schools in the most affluent neighbourhoods. It is apparent from Figure 3.1.2 that the numbers of students who register for the national senior certificate examination, but drop out before writing the examination are larger for the lower quintiles than for the higher quintiles. However, there seems to be a trend of increasing numbers of students in all quintiles dropping out over the last four years.

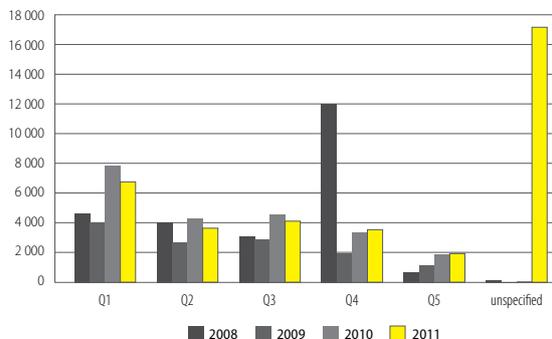
Considering that these data are derived by comparing the numbers of those who enrol for Grade 12 examinations and those who actually sit for the examinations, we have no reason to believe that students at this point would leave one school for another. In the first place, the information above suggests that poverty is a significant contributor to school drop-out rates, as the numbers of drop-outs are highest within the lower quintiles. However, the number of learners who drop out from the higher quintile schools cannot be ignored, and suggest that something more than poverty may be at play. The 2008 ministerial report (Nyanda et al. 2008) also states that one of the shortcomings in our understanding of high drop-out rates is the limited grasp of the interactions of the learner, family and school characteristics in influencing drop-out in schools, because they have always been studied separately.

What we do know, though, is that in South Africa we have some schools that are highly functional and several that are completely dysfunctional. Van der Berg (2011) describes the South African schooling system as 'dualistic' in that few schools (10 per cent in his calculation) can be regarded as quality schools, while the rest are of poor quality. The former category consists predominantly of former white schools with well-qualified teachers, functional administrations, good assessment procedures and active parental involvement, which produce strong cognitive skills in the learners. The remainder produce average to weak cognitive skills and have teachers who are less qualified and demotivated. It is to be expected, therefore, that the bulk of these learners, who experience problems in the senior secondary school, will complete their basic education with great difficulty.

Transition from school

Many of the problems relating to drop-out rates during the last three years of senior secondary education are rooted in the education policy shift of 1995, which was aimed at reducing the number of over-age learners in the schooling system. Its consequence was that large groups of young people, who previously would have remained in the schooling system, were pushed into the labour market with little education and

Figure 3.1.2: Drop-out rate per quintile, 2008–2011



Source: Statistics provided by Umalusi, 2012

few skills that matched the needs of the economy. Black schools, which had a history of higher rates of grade repetition, were disproportionately affected by this policy (Burger & Von Fintel 2010).

The fact that the state does not provide many opportunities for young people to re-enter the education system, therefore, exacerbates the travesty that is faced by many young people as they languish at the margins of society because they have missed their first opportunity to obtain a senior certificate qualification.

In theory, young people can choose from a variety of paths that connect education and work or further learning during their evolution from childhood to adulthood. These transition routes include:

- » from school to a post-school education institution, and then to work;
- » from school to an apprenticeship or learnership, and then to work; and
- » from school directly to work.

In instances where transition from one type of education provision to the next is clear and there is an established relationship, the connection with work is also better. For example, it is true that the school education system is actually mapped into the higher education system – the nature of the subjects learned in the upper part of the secondary education is often mirrored in the higher education system, and is, in fact, an extension and deepening of this knowledge. The senior certificate, therefore, has become the acknowledged selection tool for admission to higher education. Because universities are few, and selection takes place at the upper levels of the 'matric' pass range, a large number of students that have passed the senior certificate examinations cannot gain admission to these institutions.

The next post-school institutional option is the further education and training (FET) college, with a curriculum that is designed for admission after passing Grade 9 at secondary level. However, these colleges already have a large supply of students who have passed matric with low marks; hence, learners with senior certificates are cherry picked at the expense of those that have not obtained this qualification. In addition, questions that have been raised about the quality and administration of FET institutions have also made them a less desirable tertiary option for students and their parents who prefer the university route (DHET 2012). This is not a unique South African experience, as parents and their children all over the world realise that the more education one acquires, the higher one's earnings are likely to be, and the lower one's chances of unemployment (Wolf 2011).

Another transition route is a work-based learning pathway, like an apprenticeship or a learnership. Learnerships were introduced into the South African training system as an intervention to solve a number of problems experienced in the production of skills for the country. The list of these problems includes:

- » A need to create a work-based learning pathway of education and training qualifications and, thereby, move away from an entirely institution-based learning mode. The creation of this pathway was particularly important in the past decade, as the school system was underperforming, with less than 50 per cent of students who wrote the senior certificate examination passing. The alternative form of education was a compensatory education with a practical aim.
- » A need to replace artisan training, which took too long to complete for learners who were not able to access employment, due to partly completed credentials.
- » A need to formalise the skills programmes required by the labour market that were not easily accommodated in FET colleges.
- » The inadequacy of workshop facilities at FET colleges and the added need to include work experiences in the curriculum, in order to prepare learners better for the world of work.

When learnerships were introduced into the system, they were premised on these underlying assumptions, which have always been weakly articulated. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) then designed unit standards-based qualifications, which were meant to be 'national qualifications' since they were not linked to any institutional provision and any provider could provide them. These qualifications have

been pegged at the level of some of the formal and institutionalised qualifications, such as the senior secondary certificate, but use lengthy and complex terminology to describe them. The intention of this model has been to provide an alternate route to obtaining a senior secondary school equivalent qualification or a qualification that would compensate for the non-acquisition of a national senior certificate.

There is, however, evidence that learnerships are not being used as an alternative to the national senior certificate (Allais 2007). This is the case primarily because schools have been picking up momentum in increasing the pool of Grade 12 qualifying students, as evidenced by improved overall pass rates. Even though students may drop out before they write the Grade 12 examination, they still have been staying at school longer (Nyanda et al. 2008). It is clear that for the majority of young people and their parents, completing Grade 12 is still the first priority and preferred route. Consequently, learnerships have been taken up mainly by young people who have attempted Grade 12, some of whom have failed and others who have passed weakly, instead of being used as an alternative pathway to obtaining a senior certificate. Recent research by the Human Sciences Research Council shows that the majority of learners in the learnership system are situated at the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 2 (22 per cent) and NQF Level 4 (31 per cent), which coincide with formalised exit levels (HSRC 2008). As such, the study suggests that school leavers see learnerships as a way of improving their chances of accessing work and career opportunities, rather than compensatory education. Government regulations for qualifications have not yet accommodated any alternative route to obtaining a national senior certificate. Therefore, serious doubt exists about the ability of new compensatory programmes, like learnerships and now foundational learning, to compensate for a senior certificate qualification in our society.¹

In practice, it seems as if learnerships have come to serve as a repackaged form of artisan training. The fact that learnership qualifications are often without an institutional base has become problematic, because there are many questionable service providers in the market solely for the pursuit of profit, with little capacity to add meaningful value to the education system.²

A second problem has to do with the type of knowledge acquired in these training programmes, which are more practical and based on job tasks, as opposed to the general academic nature of a school curriculum (Gamble 2003; Young 2006). It is difficult to equate disciplinary knowledge with functional knowledge.

While large numbers of learners enrol at the beginning of each year, many do not proceed to write the examination.



A third problem is the fact that many of these learnerships tend to be 'dead-end pathways'. Just like the Youth Training Schemes of the United Kingdom (UK), learnerships here tend to be government-induced schemes that are meant to combat youth unemployment and not to further educate (Fuller & Unwin 2003). Like their counterparts in the UK, young people are churned through these learnerships primarily to provide a means of economic survival (HSRC 2008), without obtaining the skills that place them on a sustainable economic path.

There seems to be a renewed intention to reintroduce the artisanal development programme in South Africa. Again, we will have to draw on the experiences of the UK in this regard. The resuscitation of artisanal development is not any different from the modern apprenticeship programmes that surfaced at the end of the twentieth century in the UK. Fuller and Unwin (2003: 9) regard these efforts as government schemes designed to manage youth unemployment and entry to the labour market; they caution that:

the policy produces difficulties when there are more 'entitled' young people than there are employers willing to employ and train them. The gap can lead to the emergence of a sub-group of apprentices who do not have employed status and are consequently more vulnerable to the sorts of outcomes (e.g. moving around state-sponsored placements) associated with the youth training schemes of the past.

In South Africa, the Expanded Public Works and Community (EPWC) Programmes serve as short-term, government-sponsored programmes to create employment. There is, however, little evidence to suggest that these programmes equip young people to launch and build their careers and livelihoods around them.

The final option for young people without a senior certificate would be to attempt to enter employment directly after leaving school. This is the most challenging route in an economy that has become highly skills biased. It is even more challenging for learners from previously disadvantaged communities. Altman (2008) reports, for example, that in the Western Cape 75 per cent of the white, coloured and Indian population have achieved employment by the age of 22 years, compared with between 24 and 35 per cent of black Africans (depending on location). There are many reasons for this situation, but probably the most significant of these seems to be the limitation of workplace networks for young black people with lower education levels. In addition, this group seems to be in short supply of the life skills that are required to make them 'work ready' when they present themselves for job selection. In other words, since matric pass rates for white and Indian students are very high, the students from these population groups are already at an advantage, as the acquisition of a national senior certificate facilitates easier access to further opportunities. As this qualification is generally used as a

selection tool for further or higher learning, as well as employment, those not in possession of a senior certificate are at a distinct disadvantage. As mentioned above, this problem has been compounded by the fact that jobs that require high skills grew by 40 per cent over the past 18 years, while there has been a 20 per cent decline in the demand for low skills in the labour market, due to the shrinkage of the mining and agricultural industries. Few have been able to make the transition from low to higher levels of occupation (Moleke 2012).

Second-chance opportunities

There are many young people and adults who are in need of a second-chance senior certificate qualification, as it provides the gateway to most opportunities beyond schooling. Before 1994, government night schools and linked private centres offered the only officially recognised certification in adult education in South Africa – the Standard 5 adult examination and the matric for private candidates. The introduction of Curriculum 2005 for school-going learners and the growing status of the NQF led to a period of confusion, uncertainty, lack of direction, low motivation and poor quality in many public adult learning centres. It became clear that adults and out-of-school youth were increasingly losing ground in obtaining senior certificate qualifications.

In the light of the above, a national senior certificate for those outside the school system is sorely needed to provide more people with the minimum requirement for entering a competitive labour market. The South African Constitution and subsequent education legislation have promoted the notion of nine years of compulsory schooling, but unfortunately may have encouraged an incorrect perception that nine years of education is sufficient to access employment. Such perceptions are misguided, and the South African benchmark for basic education has moved to the successful completion of 12 years of education. This assertion is backed up by a number of studies done on transitions of young people (see Cloete 2009; Moleke 2012; Bhorat & Mayet 2011). As a result, there should be more urgency in finding ways to support those who have not succeeded at first in achieving the senior certificate qualification to do so at a later stage. It is not enough to merely provide an opportunity to rewrite these exams. Institutional teaching support, which does not leave students to their own devices, should also be encouraged.

In the early 1990s, the South African Council on Higher Education devoted significant resources to the development of an alternative secondary education curriculum for adults. Unfortunately, there was little uptake within the government for this programme and it died a silent death. Umalusi, the Quality Assurance Council for General and Further Education and Training, has been working towards the establishment of a national senior certificate for adults for more than six years now, but progress has been slow. Much energy and enthusiasm is needed to support and advocate for this to happen, because

it is the one single intervention that has the potential to open up many doors for so many people.

The need for a second-chance matric does not detract from the real problem of too few viable post-school options for learning. Those who do not qualify for higher education admission often find it difficult to continue with their education. This problem has been adequately highlighted in the Green Paper on post-school education (DHET 2012). It is hoped that current efforts by the DHET to address this will soon bear fruit. Nevertheless, it must be noted that the precursor to solving the problem of post-school education is still the acceleration of efforts for universal completion of senior secondary education. Of course, the ultimate solution to youth unemployment is increased employment. Visible opportunities in the labour market obviously serve as an educational incentive for learners who are about to enter the world of work. For this to happen, there will have to be greater cohesion between stakeholders, such as government, business and the labour movement, to ensure that the country is put on a growth trajectory that creates more opportunities for entrants to the labour market. In this regard, we should hope that the adoption of the National Development Plan by the government will create greater unity in purpose.

Conclusion

The senior certificate or 'matric' is the most recognised minimum education qualification that is required for success in the South African labour market. Some would say that it is almost as important as having an identity document. As the notion of school completion has become synonymous with passing matric, the senior certificate examinations have become a rite of passage for all citizens and foreign nationals residing in this country. Yet, despite its importance, it has become difficult to obtain for those who have either failed the first time around, or have postponed the completion of their secondary education.

The benefits of providing education at higher levels and to all citizens are numerous. Besides the objective of developing mental capacities in individuals, a highly educated society has many other benefits. Research has shown that educated societies are generally healthier and more tolerant, which stems from the capacity for reasoned thought and the nurturing of culture and scholarship. In this vein, Kennedy (1997) sees education as strengthening the ties that bind people, taking the fear out of difference and encouraging tolerance. In addition, it helps people to see what makes the world tick

and the ways in which they, individually and collectively, can make a difference. It is the likeliest means of creating a modern, well-skilled workforce, reducing levels of crime, and encouraging a participating citizenry.

As such, the problem of a large section of the population not attaining a senior certificate has economic consequences for the labour market, as employment conditions increasingly privilege individuals who have acquired a 'basic' education level, but this also has social costs as some individuals are limited by their low levels of education in accessing vital political and social information that allows them to participate fully as citizens. From this perspective, the need for a general education qualification, equivalent to high school completion, for most citizens remains a high educational priority in the country.

There are social justice imperatives that drive the agenda for continuing to provide education even to those who have left the formal schooling system in any given society. In the context of South Africa, it means that the greater the proportion of the population that has completed secondary education, the better opportunity will be distributed in the population in general. Concentrating all energies and resources in the trickling effects of a growing primary education system does not seem to be getting us to a point where educational opportunities are being distributed fairly in our society. Also, putting most of our resources in the university system still means the bypassing of millions of citizens. In order to equalise the opportunities given through educational access, much more effort must be put into the promotion of a completed senior secondary schooling. Equality of opportunity is about levelling the playing field for everyone during key stages of life, and the last three years of schooling are vital to this exercise. A shift in the debate towards equality of opportunity in this area promises to be a better guide for public policy and for providing similar chances to all citizens.

Notes

1. Foundational learning is a mathematics and English programme that is being advocated by the Quality Council on Trades and Occupations to serve as compensatory learning for those who have not acquired the fundamental skills in these areas before they enroll for occupational qualifications.
2. This observation is based on anecdotal conversations held with individuals working in this area.

A national senior certificate for those outside the school system is sorely needed to provide more people with the minimum requirement for entering a competitive labour market.

