

# How the GEC can improve the quality of our education system

By Professor Cyril Nhlanhla Mbatha and Dr Vijay Reddy

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The South African government's announcement to introduce a mid-level high school certificate for Grade 9 learners (General Education Certificate) has been criticised for its potential to encourage a higher number of high-school dropouts. A counterargument is that the certificate will provide much-needed structure to South Africa's schooling system and likely improve the quality of learning, resulting in better long-term outcomes for learners. Each year more than 300,000 learners drop out of the schooling system between Grades 10 and 12. These learners leave the education system without any formal recognition (a matric certificate after 12 years of schooling).



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Currently, many of the learners who drop out of the schooling system before obtaining a Matric have limited odds of finding employment, especially in the formal sector. It is therefore important that the learners find alternative opportunities, including obtaining training that is non-academic. If soundly provided at TVET colleges, this type of training would prepare the youth for more vocational-technical work (e.g. boiler-making) or vocational occupational work (e.g. basic business support) both in formal and informal employment.

The General Education Certificate (GEC) has the potential to give learners who drop out without a matric, a formal certificate they can use to enter into vocational training programmes provided at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, or to provide some form of certification upon entering the world of employment.

## Improving the education system

At the moment critics also point out that many TVET institutions in South Africa are currently too disorganised to cope with a possible influx of learners who may opt for more vocational training programmes after obtaining a GEC. Although this argument has merit, it is also important to note that with the GEC in place and the spotlight on TVET colleges, the incentives would be greater for the TVET system to be improved in terms of better and more closely aligned curriculum development, internal management practices and also attracting government and private sector funding. With the expectations growing for TVET colleges to play an important role in the education system, the opportunities for them to offer more relevant

vocational and occupational training programmes would more likely increase in areas including agriculture, business, tourism, ICT, etc.

The clarity on the contributions of TVET colleges into the post-school education system would be enhanced by the GEC becoming a generally accepted qualification for learner admissions into TVET colleges. This would also limit the number of Matric graduates who (rationally or not) enter TVET programmes that are pitched at lower NQF (National Qualification Framework) levels than the matric certificate itself. The GEC would ensure that more learners are able to apply for admission with success into TVET colleges. In addition, with more vocational training options opened by introducing the GEC, fewer learners would (irrationally) aspire to pursue the more academic route through a matric certificate, given that they could follow the vocational route which is more aligned with the world of practical work.

Currently, learners do not seem to think that there are more options available beyond just the academic route in their educational trajectories. For example, in the TIMSS 2015 survey, when asked about their educational aspirations, more than 70% of Grade 9 learners indicated that they aspired to obtain a tertiary qualification in the form of a certificate, diploma or university degree. It should be ironic (and unrealistic) that the high aspiration for these academic pathways is found in a country ranked amongst the lowest in academic tests. It is clear that the system is structured in a way that has not allowed or informed the youth to be realistic about their own potential and the availability of other possibilities for training, other than obtaining a matric to gain a university entrance.

To change the status quo, the minimum competencies required to obtain the GEC must be made explicit. The types of subjects that will be chosen for assessment to obtain the GEC must have high currency in society, for example, business numeracy (Maths or Accounting) and literacy skills (English Language for Business). These subjects should signal the readiness of learners to participate with more relative success in technical vocational programmes (e.g. the three-year N- courses) and occupational programmes (e.g. the short-term training programmes for trades like dressmaking) or enter directly into the labour market.

One of the more likely positive side effects of putting in place a national assessment tool for high quality and the economically relevant qualification would be the improvement of the quality of education offered at lower grades in the schooling system. Schools and teachers would most likely respond by putting more effort into improving pass rates at much lower grades than is currently the practice.

## **Practical demands of the economy**

The quality of the GEC should also ensure that learners have higher options to enter different types of TVET programmes, including those that offer short term occupational and trade qualifications through private colleges (not just the N- courses, which are technical programmes usually offered at public colleges). The obligation would be on the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to make sure that all TVET programmes have high economic currencies that are aligned and responsive to the practical demands of the labour market.

With a meaningful GEC and the different TVET programmes that are responsive to the current needs of the economy in

place, the prevailing negative mindsets of learners and employers around vocational, technical as well as occupational trades routes are more likely to dissipate. The change in the mindsets and increased responsiveness of TVET programmes to the needs of a changing economy are crucial at this point in the country's current economic circumstances.

The South African economy has been experiencing an expansion of its informal sector at the expense of its formal sector. Young people, therefore, need to be empowered with the kind of technical and vocational training that will make them more self-sustainable as employees and entrepreneurs. Many of the formal jobs historically found in the primary and secondary sectors, like mining, have been replaced by informal jobs. These are some of the structural economic changes to which TVET education needs to respond and must be managed by the DHET.

## **Deliberate preparation necessary**

TVET curriculum should deliberately prepare more young people for jobs in the informal sectors through its occupational and trades programmes. Of course, the historical three-year technical programmes in areas including welding should continue, but an increasing emphasis should also go into short-term occupational trades like tailoring, hairdressing, etc. With relevant business management skills (e.g. bookkeeping and ICT) for all programmes, TVET graduates would have better chances of navigating the growing informal sector when they cannot find formal employment.

Hence, the discussion around the introduction of the GEC should not just focus on whether or not the certificate would encourage higher drop-out rates, but additionally on how the GEC can improve the quality of school learning and vocational training to be more responsive to emerging economic challenges that are facing the youth entering the labour market.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Professor Cyril Nhlanhla Mbatia is a Professor of Economics at the School of Business Leadership, Unisa. He has a PhD in Economics from Rhodes University and teaches micro, macro and public economics. His research focus is on the management of natural resources like land and water, skills development for the labour market and international trade of agricultural goods. He loves African traditional music with Islamic influences.

Dr Vijay Reddy is a Distinguished Research Specialist in the Education and Skills Development research programme at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Dr Reddy assumed this position after serving as the Executive Director of the programme from 2006 to 2018. The three major thrusts of her research are large-scale achievement studies, skills planning and public understanding of science. In addition, she also conducts life history research. Dr Reddy holds undergraduate degrees from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (previously University of Durban-Westville), an MEd from Rutgers University in the USA (as a Fulbright Scholar), a Doctorate in Education from the University of Durban-Westville (with joint supervision from the University of Sussex).

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