



ISASA

Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa

Curriculum and Assessment in ISASA Schools in South Africa

For the first time in more than three decades, South African schools have to prepare learners from grades R to 12 for a brand new curriculum. This is well overdue because our former curricula lagged behind international trends and standards.

The new curriculum marks a significant departure from the past because it is outcomes-based. Our model of outcomes-based education (OBE) has been shaped by the experience and ideas of many countries. At a recent world curriculum conference, of the 39 countries present, 37 had implemented OBE – including Canada, Germany, Bulgaria, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Turkey and mainland China.

Why outcomes-based education?

The drive for OBE came from the first democratic government in 1994 and the world of work.

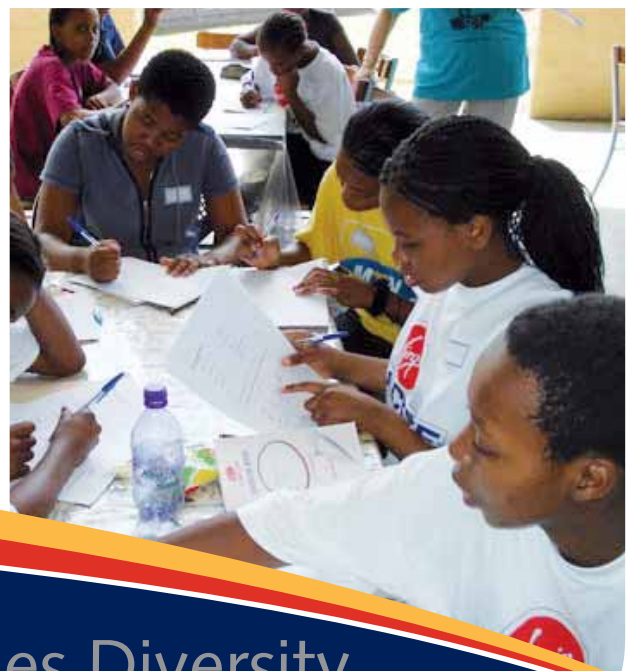
Government was faced with the political imperative of integrating a very fragmented apartheid education and training system, and bringing people previously excluded from formal education into a cohesive system which would recognise the learning they had acquired.

Employers and the trade unions were also determined to overcome frustrating problems in the old system. In the past, the education and training sub-sectors operated as separate silos with few, if any, links between them. This meant that learners trying to transfer from one sub-sector to the other with skills and qualifications that they had mastered, found that these were not recognised. The result was that valuable learning time was lost, which the country could ill afford in a global economy where the skills level of a population is of critical importance and must be constantly improved for competitive advantage.

The way to overcome this, as many countries have realised, is to focus on the outcomes or standards of competence that the learners must be able to demonstrate at the end of their learning programme, and not only on the content or methodology of the courses and specific qualifications.

The result was the establishment of a qualifications ladder or framework known as the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) on which the outcomes of all learning programmes must be registered at the appropriate level. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) was established as the body that is responsible for safeguarding the NQF and the quality of our education and training system.

The NQF connects the two sub-sectors of education and training through the outcomes that different learning programmes in either sector must achieve. There are eight rungs on the ladder of outcomes, covering learning levels from basic literacy to a PhD. Now, for the first time, learners can move across the sub-sectors and obtain credits for their previous learning in terms of the levels they have achieved – a huge improvement on the past.



Quality Values Diversity

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SAQA has developed a set of Critical and Developmental Outcomes that define what all students must be able to do successfully when they complete a learning programme. These Critical and Developmental Outcomes form the foundation for all education and training in South Africa.

The outcomes aim to give the South African Constitution (1996) practical expression in classrooms. They capture the principles of non-discrimination, democratic values and human rights, aiming to create individuals who are equipped to take their place as citizens of the 21st century.

What does OBE mean for learning and teaching in schools?

Two main phases of OBE affect school curricula: the General Education and Training (GET) phase that includes grades R – 9, and the Further Education and Training (FET) phase, grades 10 – 12.

Learner focus

Whereas the previous curriculum in South Africa focused on children's learning from the perspective of what teachers were required to teach, such as a syllabus, or a list of topics in a subject, the Revised National Curriculum Statements (RNCS) describe learning from the perspective of the child, namely what the child is required to understand and be able to do, after the teaching has taken place. Clearly, a focus on the knowledge and skills that the child has acquired through the learning process is the more educationally sound approach.

Assessment

This change in focus has had an impact on how assessment is designed. The starting point in the design of the assessment is to determine what answer from a child will illustrate his/her understanding of a topic. In the previous curriculum, the assessment questions bore a close resemblance to those that teachers had covered in class or learners had encountered in their own studies. Such practices encouraged 'drill and practice', rather than understanding.

The new curriculum does require learners to learn and master fundamental skills and knowledge, even through drill and practice. In fact, the skills of reading, writing and numeracy must be honed for learners to do well in the new curriculum. However, the new curriculum emphasises that mastering the fundamental knowledge and developing the core skills is not enough. These skills are only the first step to understanding and application, and to analysing and evaluating knowledge, which are the higher levels of learning.

In the previous curriculum, higher-order thinking skills were not specifically developed in the syllabus; they may have been acquired incidentally in the classroom of an inspired teacher. However, the new curriculum focuses explicitly on exposing learners to higher-order thinking in all their subjects.

Criticisms of OBE

Failure of OBE

It is said that OBE has failed in many countries. This is a misleading allegation. The problem has been not so much the philosophy of outcomes-based education as inappropriate implementation strategies. Many countries have had difficulty in finding the balance between appropriate indicators of quality, and actual learning and teaching. Some systems have over-emphasised assessment and the associated administration and, in that process, have overloaded teachers with tasks that are not related to their teaching.

Teacher quality

The quality of the teaching force in a country is a crucial element in the successful implementation of OBE. Are the teachers able to adjust to the shift in focus required by outcomes-based education, particularly in the design of assessment?

Where teachers' competency is in doubt, one strategy used by governments is to assist them to adjust by prescribing in detail what they should be doing in the classroom. This can lead to over-prescription and become a straitjacket for experienced, competent teachers. The key is to provide sufficient guidance to empower teachers to develop on their own. In some countries, the over-prescription of teaching strategies has been blamed on OBE, when in fact it is related to issues of teacher competency.

Curriculum 2005

OBE was first introduced in the GET phase for grades R – 9, in what was called 'Curriculum 2005'. This was found to be problematic in both its approach and implementation. One of its main failings was that it concentrated too much on skills and the processes of learning without sufficient specification of content and knowledge. When Professor Kader Asmal was Minister of Education, he recognised this and demonstrated leadership and courage in insisting on a wholesale review of it.

As a result, the Revised National Curriculum Statements (RCNS) were developed for the GET and FET phases, and have produced far better curricula compared with any we have had in the past.

Can ISASA schools choose their curriculum?

To a large extent, ISASA schools can choose the curricula they teach and the examinations their learners write.

In South Africa, the Constitution, which guarantees the right of independent schools to exist, stipulates that they must 'maintain standards that are not inferior to standards at comparable public educational institutions'. This means that independent schools must be able to show that their learning programmes lead to the achievement of outcomes and standards equivalent to those of the Revised National Curriculum Statements for grades 9 and 12. These are the two exit points of the system where outcomes and standards are formally measured through external examinations across the country.

However, the content, sequence or methods of their learning programmes are not prescribed, nor are the outcomes of the other grades. Thus independent schools are free to organise their teaching, learning and assessment in the way they believe will provide the best possible education, as long as the learners are able to achieve the minimum outcomes and standards.

For instance, the curriculum and assessment methods in Montessori schools are based on the theories and methods developed by Maria Montessori, the Italian educational psychologist.



Another example is the Waldorf schools, where learners each complete an intensive individual project for assessment during their final year. The project is designed to demonstrate the learner's research skills, creative thinking and other abilities, and the learner must give a formal presentation on it to the whole school community.

Some ISASA schools follow curricula that are not based on the South African curriculum. Many independent schools in Swaziland, Namibia, Lesotho and Mozambique follow the curriculum and examinations of the Cambridge Examination Board, often in adapted versions that include local content. For example, the German schools in South Africa offer a combination of the German and South African examinations.

What examinations do independent schools write?

An independent school has the freedom to choose which examining body's examinations it wants to write. South African examining bodies must be recognised by Umalusi. The two main South African examinations are

- **The state National Senior Certificate (NSC):** This is the grade 12 examination that the majority of South African learners will write in their final year of schooling as from 2008. It is based on the outcomes of Revised National Curriculum Statements (RNCS) in all subjects.
- **The examinations of the Independent Examination Board (IEB),** written by many independent school learners across the country and also based on the RNCS.

Independent schools are also free to write international examinations, such as the International Baccalaureate, the Cambridge International examinations, the O- and A-levels of the United Kingdom or the Scholastic Aptitude test (SAT) from the United States. These do not fall under Umalusi's authority, but are approved by Higher Education South Africa (HESA) for admission to tertiary institutions in South Africa.

Will the NSC be recognised internationally?

The present Senior Certificate is benchmarked internationally, as will be the new National Senior Certificate. The NSC with endorsement (for university entrance) will be equal to the British

GCE at the AS level and the Scottish Higher examinations, and the learning outcomes are equivalent to the Australian Senior Certificate which provides admission to higher education.

Will the NSC guarantee access to university?

Many South African universities have decided to develop common benchmark tests to assess the numeracy, literacy and mathematical competences needed for success at university for a number of reasons:

- From a university entrance perspective, the NSC differs in significant ways from the current senior certificate: scope of subjects, nature of learning outcomes, no aggregate mark, no higher and standard grades, and more criterion-referenced assessment. Until much more is known about the examination, the reliability of its results as a predictor of success at university cannot be validated, and this will not be known until the first few sets of learners who have passed the NSC have entered tertiary education.
- University research has shown that the existing senior certificate results are a less accurate indicator of university potential for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those educated in second or third languages. This is one reason why most universities already obtain further information about candidates' suitability through their own tests of language and mathematical skills.



Until they know more about the NSC as an accurate predictor of academic success at tertiary level, many universities will use common benchmark tests in conjunction with the NSC results to monitor their reliability and validity. Learners wishing to study at these universities will have to sit these benchmark tests, especially for admission to selective faculties.

Standardised tests from the University of Cape Town's Alternative Admissions Research Project (AARP) have been refined over many years and form the core of the tests used by the universities. The tests appraise high-level cognitive abilities such as thinking analytically, making deductions and demonstrating problem-solving skills.

The marks that learners score on these tests will be used in conjunction with their NSC results to determine their selection into particular faculties. In addition, as they do now, the universities will determine the subjects required, and the minimum standards that must be achieved in them for entrance to various faculties.

Conclusion

The 2008 NSC examinations are South Africa's first milestone in implementing a new curriculum. In the hands of competent teachers in quality schools, the new curricula will be empowering for teachers and learners, and will better prepare them for citizenship of their country and the world of the 21st century.

Because they can choose their curricula and examinations, independent schools are committed to their chosen programmes and motivated to make them succeed. They attract and retain excellent teachers who enjoy this curricular freedom and have the confidence and skills to adapt to change and innovate. Dynamic, quality teaching and learning is the result.

Curriculum development in its member schools is supported by ISASA through courses, workshops, conferences and study tours to other countries, so that teachers are able to meet new challenges creatively and incorporate the most up-to-date approaches and practices

Parents can rest assured that all ISASA member schools are quality assured. Their high standards are reflected in the excellent examination results of their learners and in other important areas of achievement. Ultimately, it is the quality of teaching and learning that children experience at school that makes the difference to their future academic and career success.