

Press Release

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SOUTH AFRICAN
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Not adding up: too few maths teachers to satisfy demand

A total of 84 high schools across the country did not offer mathematics for grade 10, 11 and 12 in the 2012 academic year, primarily as a result of a shortage of suitably qualified maths teachers. This accounts for 1.3% of all high schools (public and independent) that wrote the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination last year. Such schools will therefore offer only mathematical literacy as it is a requirement of the NSC for a pupil to take either mathematics or mathematical literacy.

The data, which comes from a reply by the minister of basic education to a parliamentary question asked by Mrs A T Lovemore MP (DA), revealed that Limpopo had the highest number of schools that did not offer mathematics, with a total of 37 such schools. This was followed by the North West (22 schools), the Western Cape (15 schools), Mpumalanga (9 schools) and the Northern Cape (1 school).

Pupils writing the NSC examinations must provide evidence of having completed the class-based assessments of a subject in grades 10 and 11 as well the final exams at the end of grade 12. This means that even if the teacher shortage is addressed in these schools, pupils who had not selected mathematics as a subject in grade 10 will not be allowed to write it as a subject once in grade 12.

Mathematics is a requirement for many courses at tertiary level (ranging from business management to engineering), and pupils who have taken only mathematical literacy are therefore excluded from applying for such courses. The number of pupils taking mathematical literacy now outstrips the number of pupils taking mathematics. In 2008 (the year the NSC was introduced) 35 000 more pupils took mathematics than took mathematical literacy. By 2012 this ratio had reversed with 65 000 more pupils taking maths literacy than mathematics.

Jonathan Snyman, a researcher at the Institute, said the increase in the number of pupils taking maths literacy at the expense of mathematics was cause for concern. 'The South African economy is becoming an increasingly tertiary-based one, requiring a more skilled workforce. Anecdotal evidence points to the fact that most pupils choose their subjects based on what they think they can pass in grade 12, without realising that many courses at universities will not accept candidates with only maths literacy.'

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