RESEP
Research on Socio-Economic Policy

Department of Economics, University of Stellenbosch

Getting a degree in South Africa: The slim chances of succeeding against the odds

Junior Tariro Chiweza and Hendrik van Broekhuizen*

RESEP Policy Brief

FEBRUARY 2017

For many young South Africans, getting a university degree provides an opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty and pervasive youth unemployment. University graduates have by far the lowest rates of unemployment and also tend to have the highest levels of job security and remuneration of any education group in the country.[1]

Sadly, weak schooling outcomes and limited post-schooling education and training opportunities mean that the vast majority of South African youths are effectively excluded from the benefits of higher education. Few secondary school leavers ever have the opportunity to enrol in undergraduate studies and even fewer ultimately acquire degrees. In this context, it is of particular interest to understand how many and which secondary school leavers manage to obtain degrees, despite weak academic achievement in secondary school or low socio-economic status.

Using integrated data from the 2008 NSC and 2009–2014 HEMIS databases[2], this policy brief focusses on those learners from the 2008 national matric cohort who, often against expectations, managed to enrol in and complete undergraduate degree studies within six years of writing the matric exams.

* Junior Tariro Chiweza is intern at the Department of Basic Education. Hendrik van Broekhuizen is Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of Economics at Stellenbosch University.

1 See Van Broekhuizen, H., Van der Berg, S., & Hofmeyr, H. (2016) on higher education access and outcomes for the 2008 National Matric Cohort.

2 The 2008 National Senior Certificate (NSC) database contains information on all matric learners who wrote the national schooling exams in 2008 and the 2009–2014 Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) database contains information on all enrolments and graduations at public universities in South Africa.

Funded by:

planning, monitoring and evaluation
Department: Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

PSPPD | PROGRAMME TO SUPPORT PRO-POOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

2030 NDP

1. How many learners obtain degrees despite weak academic performance in matric or attending poorer schools?

Matric learners who achieve Bachelor passes, those who achieve an average of 50% or higher in the NSC exams, and/or those who attend quintile 4 or 5 schools are the most likely groups to continue to higher education and complete degree qualifications. (South African schools are classified into five so-called "quintiles" (not actually equally sized) roughly based on the wealth of the areas in which the schools are located, with quintile 1 representing the poorest and quintile 5 the richest school communities.) The majority of matric learners fall below these key benchmark thresholds. Among the learners from the 2008 national matric cohort, only 20% achieved Bachelor passes, 26% achieved an average of 50% or more in the matric exams, and only 31% attended quintile 4 or 5 schools.

TABLE 1: Percentage of learners from the 2008 national matric cohort who enrolled in and/or completed undergraduate degrees within 6 years of writing the NSC exams: leaners below vs learners above key benchmark thresholds

	No (Below Benchmark)		Yes (Above Benchmark)	
	% Enrolled	% Completed	% Enrolled	% Completed
Achieved a Bachelor pass	1.8	0.7	56.1	31.3
Achieved 50% matric average or more	1.4	0.5	44.9	25.1
Attended a quintile 4 or 5 school	5.9	2.9	25.9	14.7

The figures in Table 1 show that it is extremely unlikely for learners who fall below these benchmark thresholds to enrol in undergraduate degree programmes, let alone complete those programmes. Only about 1 in every 140 learners from the 2008 national matric cohort who did not achieve Bachelor passes and 1 in every 200 learners who achieved less than 50% on average in the NSC exams went on to complete undergraduate degrees by the end of 2014. This compared to around 1 in 3 and 1 in 4, respectively, of those learners who performed at or above these benchmarks. Similarly, learners who attended quintile 4 or 5 schools were more than five times as likely to have completed university degrees within 6 years of writing the NSC exams than learners from poorer schools.

Learners with weak academic performance in matric and/or those who attended poorer schools face two major hurdles to obtaining university degrees. First, few of these learners ever gain entry to degree programmes. This may be because they do not meet the eligibility criteria for such programmes or cannot afford university study. Second, even when such learners are able to enrol in degree programmes, they are often inadequately prepared for such studies relative to their peers and therefore either take a long time to complete their studies or fail to complete it at all.

2. Who are the learners who obtain degrees despite weak academic performance in matric or attending poorer schools?

Despite the odds being stacked against learners who did not achieve Bachelor passes or 50% or higher in the NSC exams as well as against those who attended quintile 1–3 schools, around 12 300 (2.5%) of the 476 000 learners from the 2008 national matric cohort who fell into this category nonetheless still managed to complete degrees within 6 years of matriculating. However, the data also shows that most of these learners differed from the rest of their peer group in important ways that may have made them more likely to enter higher education and succeed in their degree studies.

First, among the 2008 matric learners who failed to achieve Bachelor passes or a 50% minimum average in the NSC exams, those who came from quintile 4 or 5 schools were more than twice as likely to have obtained degrees than those from quintile 1–3 schools.

Second, learners who completed degrees before the end of 2014 despite weak overall academic achievement in the NSC exams were not only more likely to have taken key gateway subjects like Mathematics and Physical Sciences, but also to have performed better in those subjects than learners who did not complete university degrees.

Third, despite still performing below the level of their quintile 4 or 5 counterparts, learners from quintile 1–3 schools who enrolled in degree programmes and particularly those who completed those programmes performed vastly better than the rest of their peer group in the NSC exams.

These findings suggest that learners who fell below the aforementioned benchmark thresholds but managed to complete university degrees against the odds were likely to be exceptional relative to their peer group in academic and/or socio-economic terms. Despite this, it is also evident that these learners differed from those above the various benchmark thresholds in terms of the types of degrees that they completed and the institutions where those degrees were obtained. For example, this group of learners was far more likely to enrol for degrees in the humanities and social sciences rather than business, commerc, and management or science, engineering and technology. Moreover, these learners were also overwhelmingly likely to have acquired their degrees from historically disadvantaged universities.

3. How many poor schools succeed against the odds by producing university graduates?

In South Africa, the ability to enter and succeed at university largely depends on the types of schools that learners attend. Quintile 1–3 schools produce far weaker schooling outcomes than quintile 4 and, in particular, quintile 5 schools. This is also true in terms of post-secondary schooling outcomes. Of the 6.8% of learners from the 2008 Matric cohort who completed degrees within 6 years of writing the NSC exams, only 28% had attended quintile 1 to 3 schools. This despite the fact that such schools accounted for 66% of all the learners in matric (Table 2). It is also telling that of the 32% of schools from the 2008 Matric cohort that had not produced any university graduates by the end of 2014, 96% were quintile 1–3 schools.

Table 2 shows the startling differences in key schooling outcomes across school quintiles among the 2008 national Matric cohort. It is clear that very few quintile 1–3 schools were able to perform at or above the average performance levels for quintile 4–5 schools in terms of producing Bachelor passes. While about 45% of all quintile 4 and 5 schools achieved Bachelor pass rates in excess of 39% in the 2008 NSC exams, less than 2% of quintile 1–3 schools followed suit. As a result, quintile 1–3 schools also had far fewer learners continuing on to degree studies and even fewer ultimately obtaining degree qualifications.

These results confirm that learners who attend poorer schools are at a disadvantage relative to those who attend quintile 4 or 5 schools in terms of becoming eligible for degree studies at university. Only a select few of the top-performing quintile 1–3 schools are able to produce results similar to those generally seen in quintile 4 and 5 schools. As a result, learners who attend wealthier schools remain significantly more likely to obtain degrees than learners who attend poorer schools.

Table 2: Key statistics and school performance benchmarks among the 2008 national matric cohort for Quintile 1–3 vs Quintile 4–5 schools

	School Quintile		
	Q1–Q3	Q4–Q5	All
Share of 2008 matric learners (%)[a]	65.9	28.8	100
Average Bachelor pass rate (%) per school	9.0	39.3	15.4
% of schools achieving Bachelor pass rate ≥ 39%[b]	1.7	45.2	12.9
Average % of matric candidates in a school accessing degree studies within 6 years of writing the NSC exams	5.2	25.1	9.4
% of schools with ≥ 25% of learners accessing degree studies within 6 years[b]	2.1	43.8	13.1
Average % of matric candidates in a school obtaining degrees within 6 years of writing the NSC exams	2.6	14.1	5.0
% of schools with ≥ 14% of learners obtaining degrees within 6 years[b]	2.0	41.6	12.1

NOTES: [a] The shares for Q1–Q3 and Q4–Q5 schools do not sum to 100% since 5.3% of the schools that participated in the 2008 NSC exams had not yet been allocated to a school quintile.
[b] The benchmark percentages chosen correspond roughly to the average performance levels observed across all quintile 4 and 5 schools.

4. What must be done to increase the likelihood of succeeding against the odds?

The post-secondary schooling experiences of the 2008 national Matric cohort show that the odds of getting a university degree in South Africa are heavily stacked against learners with weak academic performance (often not of their own making, but due to weakly performing schools) and those who attend poorer schools. This reality is unlikely to change markedly over the short term. Ensuring a more equitable distribution of university outcomes, in particular, will require commitment to several long-term policy objectives. These include:

- Increased emphasis on ***improving the quality of schooling in poor schools***, particularly in the foundation phase.
- ***Improving access to post-secondary schooling opportunities*** for academically deserving learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds or poor schools by significantly expanding the financial support available to such leaners.
- Expanding and ***improving the quality of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)*** college sector. Improving TVET will reduce the pressure on the university sector and open up legitimate alternative opportunities for the skills development that the South African economy needs.
- ***Improved academic support*** for learners at universities who gain access to degree studies despite comparatively weak academic performance or poor socio-economic background. In addition, universities could expand ***bridging courses*** for academically promising learners who fail to qualify for degree studies to allow more learners to be incorporated into university programmes.

References

Van Broekhuizen, H., Van der Berg, S., & Hofmeyr, H. (2016). *Higher Education Access and Outcomes for the 2008 National Matric Cohort*. *Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers,* (No. 16/2016).