

Standardising Assessment in an Era of Curriculum Reform: The Case of High School Exit-Level Economics Examinations in South Africa

Suriamurthee M. Maistry

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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ABSTRACT Education policy has undergone radical change in post-apartheid South Africa (SA), and high school exit-level assessment policy has been subject to pressure for reformulation. This article examines recent trends in exit-level high school Economics examinations in SA and reflects on a curriculum reform context in which examining authorities struggle to benchmark standards of assessment. In SA the exercise of standardisation and benchmarking is highly politicised, especially at the crucial, high-stakes school exit level. An account is presented of the contested nature of high-stakes assessment amidst mounting public pressure to show improved pass rates and growing critique of the quality of high school graduates. Data are drawn from a rigorous comparative analysis of standardised high school exit examinations in Economics for a 3-year period (2008-2010). The assessment protocol of the state-controlled Department of Basic Education (DBE) is analysed. The DBE administers the examination of 93% of schools in SA. The findings indicate that the standard of the exit-level Economics examination has varied considerably across the years under review, revealing the fragility and uncertainty that permeates Economics assessment as the examining authority searches for a suitable assessment standard. The article begins with an outline of the existing assessment context in SA, followed by a discussion of the contested nature of high-stakes assessment. An analysis of the selected Economics papers follows, and the article concludes with a discussion of the findings and an exploration of the constructs 'inception-year dilemmas', 'veiled upward shifts in standards' and 'fragile academic vigilance'.