

Adults to get a crack at a new matric equivalent

Elizabeth Burroughs

The necessity for a new approach to the learning needs of adults has been evident for some time now, and a new qualification geared at adults has been developed for implementation by 2016 at the latest.

The national senior certificate for adults (Nasca) was registered in the general and further education and training qualifications subframework of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in December last year. It has been developed as an equivalent to the South African school-leaving qualification, the national senior certificate (NSC).

For the purposes of this qualification, adults are defined as people of 18 years or older.

Its aim is to allow the many people who do not finish school a fresh start towards achieving a school-leaving certificate that says to the world: “This adult has the kind of knowledge and types of skills one could reasonably expect from a person leaving school after 12 years of solid education.”

Prior learning

The Nasca could be considered as a form of recognition of prior learning (RPL) because it is an opportunity for adult learners to demonstrate what they know.

In other words, adults successfully completing the Nasca will have shown that they are able to read and use information to solve problems, apply their knowledge skilfully, and write clearly and coherently in their areas of study.

These general abilities will be translated in the curricula into the relevant knowledge, thinking and skills domains associated with the subject.

So, the Nasca should reasonably be expected to open the same doors as the NSC does in workplaces and higher education.

Love of learning

One of the purposes written into the qualification is that it should reawaken a love of learning in those who take it up, allowing them to realise and value their own abilities.

A strong feature of the Nasca is that it has no formal entry requirements for study. Learners do not have to present a grade 10 or 11 report or a pre-level four qualification (on the NQF) in order to be eligible to write the adult national senior certificate exams.

However, colleges offering the Nasca will have the responsibility of screening applicants to check how ready a person is to benefit from the learning, and to provide an alternative for those who are not yet ready for the Nasca learning programme.

On the other hand, there should be enough material available for the qualification for people to form study groups or enrol with a distance education college in order to prepare for the exams.

To register for the Nasca exams, all learners will be required to write a pre-test, which will help them to prepare for the exams. These results will be used to advise the learner of his or her readiness to write the exam.

Quality of learning

Examples of such tests will be commonly available to help learners, employers, higher education authorities and the public to begin to understand the quality of learning in the qualifications. The items in these example tests are not, however, the tests that the learners will take.

Once a learner has registered and written the first exam, there is a window period of six years for completing the four subjects of the Nasca. Learners can rewrite a subject to improve their marks, and the best result is the one used at the time of certification.

On the NQF, the Nasca is an integral part of adult learning in the general and further education and training qualifications subframework, managed by Umalusi, the state's quality assurer, and so relates structurally and in terms of subject choices to the new level-one qualification, the general and further education and training certificate for adults (Getca).

This will replace the old general and further education and training certificate known as the adult basic education and training (Abet) qualification presently being offered at the same NQF level. An additional qualification is envisaged between the Getca and the Nasca.

No mopping up

Because of both its purpose and its streamlined structure, the Nasca does not "mop up" failures from the national senior certificate, and it is not a route for dealing with the pre-2008 matrics who, it is agreed, are extremely poorly served by current arrangements.

Nasca pupils do four subjects instead of the seven required by the NSC for schoolgoers. But the Nasca subjects are substantial, being 30 credits each, rather than the 20 credits for the NSC, and pupils have to pass all four subjects with at least 50% in order to qualify.

It is possible to do more than four subjects for the Nasca if an individual wishes to.

The Nasca has been based on a long-standing and very successful qualification for adults in the United States. The qualification, developed in the US during World War II, has been used to test for the general educational development (GED) of adults for more than 70 years.

The GED credential is a battery of assessments that test reading, writing and mathematical ability. The GED also develops and tests adults' knowledge skills in two other broad educational areas – natural sciences, which includes critical content and thinking skills developed in areas such as earth and space science, life sciences, physics and chemistry; and social sciences, which includes history, some aspects of geography, government and civics, and economics.

Thinking skills

Besides this, the GED curricula specify the kinds of thinking skills that candidates must acquire and be tested against.

The Nasca has taken a similar approach to that of the GED by creating comprehensive subjects that will give adult learners a good general understanding of a variety of fields, including economic and management sciences as well as information and communication technology. It will also cater for all South Africa's official languages.

Umalusi envisages that adults requiring specialisation in a specific area, such as mathematics, physical sciences, languages or subjects such as accounting, will have access to NQF level five programmes, a model that the higher education and training department has already adopted for mathematics and science.

This department is developing the curricula for the Nasca and, through the universities, is responsible for equipping teachers to handle the qualification.

One of the most important features of the Nasca is that it is to be offered as soon as possible as an exam on demand. This means that once adult candidates feel that they are prepared for the exam, they should be able to register and write without having to wait.

Elizabeth Burroughs is the senior manager of qualifications, curriculum and certification at Umalusi