

SA now bottom of class in maths, science

After years of poor performances in education rankings, SA finally hit rock bottom in an international measure of the quality of maths and science education.



Image courtesy of Grant Cochrane / FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Concern is mounting whether the education system is producing a sufficient number of graduates in the hard sciences to support SA's growth and development.

The World Economic Forum's annual report on financial development, released yesterday, placed SA last in a ranking of 62 countries in the quality of maths and science education. Last year, SA was placed second-last before Yemen.

The forum's report pointed to a high correlation between human capital and the degree of financial development in countries.

The 2011 census results, released on Tuesday, showed that a decade ago 2.7% of men and 2% of women in SA had tertiary qualifications in the natural, physical and mathematical sciences. By 2011, this had declined to 2% of men and 1.8% of women.

This year, 527,335 pupils are writing matric exams. Compared with last year, science candidates declined by 2,000, but 900 more pupils are writing maths.

Last month, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga said a summit would be convened to discuss how to increase the number of pupils studying maths and science. Yesterday, the department said it would respond to the World Economic Forum report today.

However, education expert Graeme Bloch said more needed to be done to understand why mathematics and science education was lagging. The department should devise plans to convince more pupils to pursue the subjects, instead of discussing policy, Dr Bloch said.

Marissa Rollnick, director of Wits University's Marang Centre for Science and Mathematics Education, said SA was "facing a crisis". At Wits, a maximum of 10 or 11 students specialised in science education annually and for post-graduate certificates "four students is a good year".

Improving the quantity and quality of teachers was the "key strategic leverage point" to better results, Prof Rollnick said. For existing teachers, content knowledge was an issue, with most pupils being taught "by rote".

Source: *Business Day* via I-Net Bridge

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