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## **SOUTH AFRICA: Universities face more under-prepared students**

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Increased numbers of South African school-leavers eligible for university study, but with poor pass rates in mathematics and science in the 2009 national 'matriculation' examinations, mean universities will increasingly battle to provide academic support for under-prepared students.

The 2009 matric results, released earlier this month, showed a disappointing 2% decline from 62.7% in 2008 to 60.6% in 2009 in the overall pass rate. But they also registered an almost 2% increase - from 18% in 2008 to 19.8% - in the number of students securing a so-called bachelor degree pass, which allows school-leavers to apply for entry into university.

According to Higher Education South Africa (HESA), the vice-chancellors' association, only 29% and 21% of learners obtained 40% or above in maths and physical science respectively.

The results, described as "shameful" by National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa President Ezra Ramasehla, prompted HESA to call on students to make use of the "various opportunities" for academic support now widely available at universities - such as foundation programmes, career advice and academic literacy interventions.

According to University of KwaZulu-Natal Deputy Dean of Education Professor Volker Wedekind, any drop in national maths passes means fewer students meeting entry requirements for critical disciplines such as engineering, medicine, science and commerce, and over-enrolments in the humanities and social sciences.

Wedekind said this had implications not only for universities but also for diploma and certificate courses at universities of technology and further education and training colleges.

But he said universities were unlikely this year to be caught "off guard" by the increased number of eligible candidates as they were at the start of 2009 when the first cohort of the new National Senior Certificate entered higher education.

This year, there will be some pressure on the system from the 109,697 candidates who have qualified for university entry, although many faculties will have adjusted their entry requirements, according to Wedekind,

"Because there was no benchmark in terms of points, many faculties had set their entry requirements lower than they probably should have. This resulted in many universities over-enrolling ... There were many reports of high failure rates in key gatekeeper subjects like maths," he said.

Professor Nan Yeld, Dean of the Centre for Higher Education Development at the University of Cape Town, confirmed that when it came to maths, the class of 2008 at her institution needed far more assistance than in previous years and matric results did not seem to match knowledge in the subject.

Ultimately, the system will have to expand substantially to reach the 2001 goal of the National Plan for Higher Education of a 20% participation rate by 2014.

According to University of Johannesburg Deputy Vice-chancellor Professor Adam Habib, participation of 18 to 25-year-olds is currently between 12 and 13%. Habib said expansion in the context of scarce resources presented an "absolute dilemma" for postsecondary education, which had to maintain high standards while also providing hope to members of marginalised communities and facilitating inclusive social transformation.

Not only will an expanded sector require greater infrastructure and human capacity but, as Wedekind noted, if the first cohort from the new National Senior Certificate is any indication, universities will have to "adjust their curriculum and provide students with more support".

In addition to support programmes in individual institutions aimed at consolidating knowledge and skills, Wedekind said various national policy initiatives were underway, such as an investigation into four-year bachelor degrees.

At a briefing on Wednesday, Minister of Higher Education and Training Dr Blade Nzimande confirmed that despite the need to expand the system over time, there would be no substantial increase in enrolments at universities and colleges this year.

"Enrolments must be matched to available resources, physical, human and financial," Nzimande cautioned.

According to Nzimande, the average annual growth rate in university enrolments between 2005 and 2008 was 2.8%, compared with the target rate of 2.0% set by the government in 2007. He said data showed enrolments surged above these averages between 2007 and 2008, with the head count enrolment total rising by 5% to 799,000 in 2008.

But, Nzimande added, enrolments in science and technology majors grew at a rate of only 1.1% per annum between 2005 and 2008, compared with a target of 2.9% - a major headache for a country with a severe shortage of skills in these areas.