

Online schools require better processes and systems: SACAI's response to the Rapport article of 27 November 2022

Aanlyn skole: Baie kinders gaan drup. (Online Schools: Numerous learners will fail)

** The **South African Comprehensive Assessment Institute (SACAI)** is a private assessment body that assess the National Senior Certificate (NSC) and General Education and Training Certificate: Adult Basic Education and Training (GETC: ABET) qualifications to a diverse group of candidates with special emphasis on online and distance education institutions*

The reality of online schooling

It is important to realise that online schooling in South Africa is here to stay. This is because online schooling in South Africa has only taken shape in the past 24 - 36 months. The research Rapport is referring to might therefore be premature without giving online schooling learners the opportunity to start (in lower grades) and exit the schooling system at Grade 12.

SACAI is aware that the drop-out rate of learners in conventional schools is already high¹. One concern is that the research, younger than 24 months, was quoted and might not be reliable due to the COVID-circumstances, it also cannot be compared with previous years in similar situations. SACAI agrees that there is a need for further research to eventually compare the ²GET phase (grade R – 9) and the FET phase (grade 10-12) for online- and distance learning. These two sectors need to be separated as there is a huge age variation as mentioned by Emma Wilkinson (in the article), an educational psychologist. This includes the age and maturity of the learners, the concessions required for such learners as well as inadequate space in conventional brick-and-mortar schools. There will be dropout learners with online schooling, just as there are with conventional brick-and-mortar schools.

More research needed to find solutions

Furthermore, it is important to note that some of the online institutions also cater for learners from grade R to grade 12. SACAI only operates in the FET phase, grades 10 to 12, to assist learners to eventually obtain their National Senior Certificate. SACAI agrees that there needs to be some form of regulation for the lower grades to ensure that learners are optimally prepared for the higher grades.

SACAI would like to work with stakeholders, to ensure that online schools be registered with the department of Basic Education and accredited with Umalusi. In the GET phase³ (Grade R – 9), SACAI would like to engage online school principals on how to best support learners academically and how to acquire social skills and explore other avenues. SACAI agrees that online education requires additional research, and we need to be able to evaluate whether learners can cope with this type of education delivery. Educational institutions also need to identify subjects that learners struggle with. This will require face-to-face tutoring for those learners.

Future support

¹ 250 000 school-going children drop out of school every year. This figure tripled to 750 000 during the COVID-19 pandemic.
<https://www.matric.co.za/south-africas-devastating-school-drop-out-rate/>

² GET (General Education and Training) = Grade 1-9. FET space = Grade 10-12

³ GET = Grade 1-9. SACAI does not currently operate in this space



SACAI is looking into the possibility to support lower grades (grades R – 9) with their assessments, registration with the Department of Education and accreditation with Umalusi. These assessments for online schools will be conducted at grades 3, 6 and 9 which should prepare online learners for the higher grades. SACAI is more than prepared to share and collaborate with the Department of Education pertaining to the statistics of assessment performance for these lower grades. Like every other SACAI sector that faces challenges, SACAI believes that these challenges of online schools can be tackled head-on with great minds leading to a seamless transition from conventional schooling to online schooling and vice versa.

Not enough brick-and-mortar schools

Another reality is that there are not enough conventional brick-and-mortar schools in South Africa. If there is no space for learners to attend a brick-and-mortar school, where do these education advocates expect learners to receive an education?

SACAI welcomes the update that as of 1 January 2023, registration and accreditation guidelines for online schools will be put into place by the Department of Basic Education. This will not only regulate the delivery of online education but also offer an alternative where learners who cannot be accommodated by mainstream schooling have an option from learners that require concessions to learners that cannot be accommodated in brick-and-mortar schools. This will not only assist to ensure that institutions will provide quality education but will also ensure quality results for learners enrolled in these institutions.

SACAI is concerned and supports the apprehension that there is no provision for online schools in the Bela Bill. SACAI has also contributed comments on the Bela Bill in this regard.

Ensure that institutions are affiliated with an accredited institution

SACAI is cognisant of the challenges surrounding distance education, with the major challenges being institutions that falsely claim to be affiliated with SACAI, and some distance education providers and repeater centres operating like schools without being registered and accredited as such. “If a distance education provider or repeater centre wants to operate like a school, it should take the necessary steps to register with the relevant provisional education department and seek accreditation through Umalusi”, says Keith Maseko, SACAI CEO. SACAI has made great progress in having distance education acknowledged as an alternative to traditional schooling, but things go wrong when distance education institutions start operating like fully-fledged schools. In this new academic year, parents and learners are strongly advised to watch out for institutions that make false claims about being registered with SACAI, as well as institutions that offer distance education or repeater (rewrite) services while operating like a school. Such awareness will eliminate the risk of candidates not being certified at the end of their Grade 12 examinations.

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More about SACAI

SACAI differs from the more conventional assessment bodies (which operate exclusively in schools), in the sense that SACAI has and will continue to identify solutions to the

challenges faced with traditional school-based approaches and conventional pedagogy. SACAI is fully committed to continuing working to create alternative education solutions in a world that is not always supportive of the ever-evolving educational needs of learners.

Learners registered with SACAI often indicate that they chose distance education or smaller independent schools because they did not find the mainstream schooling system to be a good fit. There are many reasons why parents and learners seek alternative education solutions, some of which include religion, culture, finances or learning difficulties that require special attention not offered by most conventional classrooms. There have, over the years, been encouraging improvements in the performance not only of the learners, but also in the quality output of the SACAI registered institutions that enable a unique learning experience.

SACAI's existence is grounded in the unique cohort it serves and the institute has seen a steady increase in the number of learner enrolments at its registered institutions.

SACAI is one of two private independent assessment bodies in South Africa that, in addition to the Department of Basic Education, that assesses the National Senior Certificate (also known as the matric qualification).

SACAI is fully accredited by Umalusi to assess the National Senior Certificate (NSC) in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase. The institute registers distance education providers, online schools and small-medium-sized conventional independent schools that offer the NSC qualification to Grade 10-12 learners.