

Overview of the South African Educational System

Secondary school education consists of Grade 8 through to Grade 12. At the end of Grade 12, learners pass the National Senior Certificate (NSC), called “matric certificate” which enables them to pursue tertiary education. This document explores:

- Subject choices in secondary school
- Matric
- National Qualification Framework
- Application to University
- Financial Assistance

A. Subject Choices

Seven subjects need to be studied to qualify for the matric certificate. Four are mandatory (Group A) and three are chosen by the learner at the end of Grade 9, either in “sciences” or “commerce” (Group B). The learner will study these seven subjects from Grade 10 to 12.

Group A (mandatory):

- **Two language subjects:** A “home language” (e.g. Zulu, Sotho, etc.) and a “first additional language” (in general, English in Alexandra high schools).
- **Mathematics or Mathematical Literacy (“Maths Lit”).** If a learner struggles with Mathematics, Mathematical Literacy will help them to get a higher mark at matric level and a better “APS” score when applying to universities. However, certain programmes, for example Engineering, are only available to learners who have matriculated with Mathematics as subject.
- **Life Orientation**

Group B:

- **Sciences stream:** Life Sciences, Physical Sciences and Geography (or History, Accounting, or Computers)
- **Commerce stream:** Accounting, Business Studies and Economics (or Tourism, Consumer Studies)

School Year and Evaluation

The school year starts in January and ends early December. There are four terms with exams being held before the end of each term (2020: March 20, June 12, September 18 and December 2).

In general, the following are the school teaching hours per week that should be dedicated to the seven different subjects for Grade 10 to 12 learners:

Subject	Hours per week
Home Language	4,5 hours
First Additional Language	4,5 hours
Mathematics and Mathematical Literacy	4,5 hours
Life Orientation	2 hours
Group B Subjects (3 x 4 hours)	12 hours
Total	27,5 hours

Final evaluation results of these subjects are then provided at the end of the school year in December based on the evaluation system below:

Level of Achievement	Corresponding Marks
7	80-100%
6	70-79%
5	60-69%
4	50-59%
3	40-49%
2	30-39%
1	0-29%

Learners are promoted from one grade to the next if they obtain at least 33% in Maths and at least 40% (i.e. Level 3 and above) in three of the seven subjects. However, one of these subjects must be the learner's home language.

Individual subject evaluation results are weighted as follows: 25% for homework completed during the year and 75% for the final year end exam. For example, please see the attached Grade 11 year-end report.

B. Matric

- Learners pass if they get at least 40% for three subjects (including home language) and at least 33% in Maths
- Individual subject evaluation results: 25% is given for homework completed during the year and 75% for the final year end exam.
- There are three pass levels for Matric (Grade 12) which indicate the studies a learner can register for at tertiary level (but does not necessarily mean they will be admitted).

Learners need 40% in home language but must also meet the following criteria to qualify for certain studies:

1. Higher Certificate – minimum 40% in two subjects and 30% in three subjects
2. Diploma – minimum 40% in four subjects and 30% in two subjects

3. Degree – minimum 50% in four subjects and 30% in two subjects

A learner gets a subject distinction if their mark is above 75% in that subject.

C. National Qualification Framework (NQF)

There are different institutions offering different levels of education

- Universities (degrees): University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of Pretoria (UP/Tuks/Tukkies), University of Johannesburg (UJ)
- Universities of technology (national diplomas, BTech): UJ, Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), Vaal University of Technology (VUT)
- Distance learning: University of South Africa (Unisa)
- Private colleges (certificates, diplomas, degrees)
- Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges (national diplomas, National Accredited Technical Education Diploma [NATED], National Certificate Vocational [NCV])
- Learnerships (national certificate of different levels, up to advanced certificates) – one to two years, made up of 30% course work and 70% work in a company
- Apprenticeships (trade profession, like a welder, plumber, fitter, mechanic, electrician, etc.) – three to four years training in a company

At university, you can study for a degree, Honours, Master, Doctorate, a diploma, a (BTech), a higher certificate

What is a Bachelor's Degree? (three to four years)

A degree starts with a B – then is further defined depending on the faculty: e.g. Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor of Science (BSc), Bachelor of Commerce (BCom), etc. It is a more theoretical and less practical orientation (even if certain programmes require six to eight weeks' industry training).

The degree can be followed by postgraduate studies: Honours (one year), Master's, and Doctorate degrees.

What is a BTech degree? (four years)

The BTech degree is generally practice- or career-oriented. It includes a six-month "in-service training" in third year.

The BTech degree can be followed by postgraduate studies: Honours (one year), Master's, and Doctorate degrees.

What is a National Diploma? (one to three years)

A National Diploma is directly linked to a specific career field. So, for example, if a student studies for a National Diploma in Hospitality Management, they will have the option of becoming a Hotel Manager, Food and Beverage Manager or Executive Chef depending on what they specialise in. With a National Diploma, students are required to do a period, e.g. six to 12 months, of in-service training in a company.

A national diploma is offered at a TVET college or universities of technologies like UJ, TUT, and VUT.

The diploma is followed by an Advanced Diploma (4th year) and then Honours (one year), Master's, and Doctorate degrees.

What is a Higher Certificate? (one to two years)

While some course providers may ask for a Grade 12 certificate, others will let students in with Grade 10 as their highest qualification. It is offered at TVET college, trade schools (beauty school, chef school or IT college) and in-house training in various industries (Sector Education and Training Authority, or SETA).

The **South African Qualifications Authority** (SAQA) is mandated to oversee the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF consists of 10 levels divided into three bands. Levels 1 to 4 equate to high school Grades 9 to 12 or vocational training, 5 to 7 are college diplomas and technical qualifications, and 7 to 10 are university degrees.

NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK	
LEVELS	SUB-FRAMEWORK & QUALIFICATION TYPES
10	Doctorate degree
9	Master's degree
8	Honours degree, Post-graduate diploma and Professional Qualifications
7	Bachelor's degree and Advanced Diploma
6	Diploma and Advanced Certificates
5	Higher Certificates and Advanced National (vocational) Certificate
4	Grade 12, National Certificate
3	Grade 11, Intermediate Certificate
2	Grade 10, Elementary Certificate
1	Grade 9, General Certificate

D. Application to universities

University applications are based on the learner’s **Grade 11 results**. To successfully apply for a specific undergraduate degree, a learner must meet the minimum Admission Points Score (APS) requirements as calculated by the specific university for that specific programme in a faculty.

The APS calculation is generally based on the best results across seven subjects. At some universities like UJ, Life Orientation is excluded from the APS calculation.

Example of APS Calculation

Subject	Grade 11 results	UJ APS score	Grade 12 results	UJ APS score
Home Language	Level 6	6	Level 6	6
First Additional Language	Level 6	6	Level 6	6
Mathematics	Level 4	4	Level 4	4
Life Sciences	Level 4	4	Level 5	5
Geography	Level 3	3	Level 4	4
Physical Sciences	Level 3	3	Level 3	3
Total APS score		26		28

A final decision is then made based on the Grade 12 results released early January after final matric exams.

Pure Maths (some learners do “Maths literacy”) is compulsory in many faculties, such as Engineering, Commerce, Law and Management Sciences at Wits.

Grade 12 learners are required to complete the **National Benchmark Test (NBT)** by many universities (at UJ and Wits for some faculties). The NBTs are administered independently and once completed the results are made available to all universities to which a learner has applied. To register and schedule when they will do the NBT, learners need to register on the [NBT website](#) and pay the necessary fee. The NBT consists of two tests. The first test is the **Academic and Quantitative Literacy Test** and the second test is the **Mathematics Test**. The tests are used to assess the academic readiness of first-year university students and to supplement the learner’s Grade 11 and 12 results.

E. Financial Assistance

The **National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)** enables students from low/middle income families (less than R350 000/year in 2018) to obtain government bursaries to study at 26 public higher education institutions (universities) and 50 TVET colleges.

- The bursary covers fees as well as some of the accommodation and textbook costs.
- If the family receives child support grants or disability grants administered through the South Africa Social Security Agency (SASSA), the student automatically is granted a bursary. If the family does not receive grants, the student application is assessed (proof of income and other supporting documentation need to be submitted).

- If you have received another bursary which does not cover all your expenses, you can receive a top-up from The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NFSAS).

Application deadlines and further details can be found from May/June on the [NFSAS website](#). Applications normally open in July and close in September or October.

Other bursary/scholarship schemes

There are also several bursaries and scholarships offered by a number of large corporates in South Africa, to academically-inclined students in need of financial assistance. These bursary programmes are normally better than NSFAS because they provide full funding (including an allowance, books, laptops, etc.), wrap-around support (mentoring, tutoring etc.), as well as (ordinarily) a job offer at the end of a student's studies. However, learners need to have outstanding marks (above 65%) **and deadlines are normally very early in the year, around March/April**. Some of the best bursary/scholarships schemes include:

- Thuthuka Bursary Fund
- Allan Gray Orbis Foundation
- Telkom Bursaries
- Sasol Bursaries
- Investec Bursaries
- HCI Foundation Bursaries
- Funza Lushaka Bursary (for teaching)
- Eskom Bursaries

Further bursary information can be found here: [Bursaries in South Africa](#)

Other useful links/resources

- Some of the best revision books are found in the Answer Series, which include practical examples taken from actual exams) for Grade 10, Grade 11, Grade 12: [The Answer](#).
- To download past Matric papers and their memos, download the app 'Don't Fail'

Yazi is an online platform which provides information on the career pathway from school to work and can be accessed by clicking [here](#).

Want to know more?

[Sizanani blogpost](#)

[Grade 12 Education curriculum](#)

