

Why St Anne's write IEB exams?

Periodically parents inquire why we continue to write examinations set by the IEB rather than entering girls for the national equivalent set by the Department of Education. The argument goes that because the IEB examinations are considered more difficult, we end up further disadvantaging girls already handicapped by quotas. University claims that they make no distinction between the State's examination and the IEB only serve to make our choice of examination board all the more incomprehensible. It is as well, therefore, to remind ourselves why it is in the College's best interests to stick with the IEB.

1. The perception that one examination is easier than another will always remain contested. The examinations are required to be 'of an equivalent standard' and it is the job of Umalusi to ensure that this is the case. 'Standard' and 'quality' are related but separate issues.
2. We share with the IEB the belief that good assessment promotes good teaching. While most South African schools teach a common curriculum, the National Curriculum Statement, the IEB has its own set of Subject Assessment Guidelines, which we believe offer a more reliable, rigorous and innovative method of assessment at the end of Grade 12.
3. A related advantage is the strong relationship that exists between the IEB and schools. Our teachers participate actively in IEB assessment as markers, moderators and examiners. The relatively small size of the organisation and the accessibility of its staff allow it to be more responsive to inquiries. Regular conferences and workshops give teachers feedback on exams, offer subject extension and disseminate information.
4. The focus of our efforts in Grade 12 may be the National Senior Certificate, but we do our girls a disservice if we think only in terms of marks, as opposed to what these marks should indicate. Roughly a third of South Africa's university enrolment fails their first year because their schooling and assessment have left them ill-prepared for tertiary study. It would appear that the marks have flattered to deceive.
5. As a related point, National Benchmark Tests or their equivalents are carrying increasing weight in university entrance because they focus on qualities of thinking rather than on the recall of content. The tests look for attributes such as applying of knowledge, critical thinking, coping with the unfamiliar, showing creativity and initiative – attributes we believe are better fostered with the help of the IEB.
6. We have to challenge the unspoken notion that it is the function of a school to provide 'nice marks', artificially massaged to smooth the path of girls to the university, course or residence of their choice. The integrity of our assessment is a much more valuable support to a girl's application. The same has to be said of the IEB itself, which undertakes regular benchmarking exercises with equivalent bodies overseas.
7. While it is highly unlikely that universities in any public forum will concede any advantage in attending an IEB school, there is anecdotal evidence that the exam is held in high regard. Universities have a tough job balancing issues of equity and redress against throughput rates, which form the basis of government funding. Recent research done at UCT supports the view that IEB candidates are well-prepared and stay the course. IEB candidates in a given year comprised 2% of Grade 12 year cohort, yet 15% of the subsequent 1st year

intake was from IEB schools. 25% of graduates come from IEB schools, which also have very low dropout rates (under 2%)

8. In conclusion, although one must resist easy comparisons with the State, there is compelling evidence that the IEB accommodates the educational aspirations of independent schools such as St Anne's.

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