The NBT and the NSC: how to optimise the partnership

C. Bohlmann*
University of Cape Town
carol.bohlmann@uct.ac.za
B. Huntley*
University of the Witwatersrand
belinda.huntley@wits.ac.za

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For many years various assessment tools have been evident at the post-school, pre-university level, such as the matriculation examination (pre 2008), the NSC (from 2008) and the Alternative Admissions Research Project (AARP) tests used by many universities. At the end of 2008 school leavers wrote the new National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination for the first time. From 2005 the National Benchmark Test Project (NBTP) has focused on the development of national tests in academic/quantitative literacy and mathematics, piloted in 2008 (small scale) and in 2009, culminating in a standard setting exercise in 2009, which determined two benchmarks for these domains. The lower benchmark separates students unlikely to succeed in Higher Education (HE) programmes from those likely to succeed provided they receive appropriate support; the upper benchmark separates the latter from those students who are expected to cope without the provision of additional support. For 2010 many HE institutions have elected to use the NBT tests for placement purposes, together with the statutory NSC.

Understandably there has been some concern over the 2008 NSC results in mathematics. Many institutions are currently experiencing poorer than expected mid-year mathematics results. The challenge for HE is to make optimum use of the NSC and NBT results, in order to admit, place and support students in their mathematics studies.

This paper provides some background information on the assessment landscape out of which the NBTs developed and uses the results of a few universities to compare the mathematics performance of first year students in 2009. It aims to assist decision makers in HE in their interpretation of student results and the subsequent placement of students into various programmes.