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# Threats to the quality of marking of the national senior certificate examinations in the Northern Cape

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## Abstract

*Examinations are regarded as vital instruments not only to determine the progress and success of learners, but also the quality of an education system. Owing to these high stakes, South Africa places enormous emphasis on the National Senior Certificate examination. Although quality should be ensured by an effective, accurate and a high standard in the marking process, complaints suggest that there may be threats to the quality of marking and, by implication, to the education system itself. This exploratory study reports on the possible threats to a high standard of marking that emerged from data generated through semi-structured interviews with various role-players involved in the marking process. The findings suggest that the threats relate to the appointment of markers, the competency of the markers and an overall lack of confidence in the marking process. We conclude the article by proposing various recommendations to curb the identified threats to accurate marking.*

**Keywords:** markers' competence, markers' appointment, National Senior Certificate examination, marking standard

## 1. Introduction

In South Africa (SA), the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination serves as a school-leaving certificate, as a university-entrance qualification and as the public measure of learners' performance (Umalusi, 2004). The NSC examination also serves as a measure of accountability and a yardstick to measure the quality and effectiveness of the entire education system. Suspicions about the quality of the examination process could therefore hamper learners' access to tertiary institutions, their entry into the workplace and thus have a negative influence on the development of the country.

The national regulatory body, Umalusi, ensures the quality and integrity of the NSC examination. In addition, the *Regulations Pertaining to the Conduct, Administration and Management of the National Senior Certificate Examinations* (NSC regulations) (DBE, 2014, chap. 1, s. 2) aim to "regulate and control the administration, management and conduct of the NSC examination and assessment process". Complementary to the NSC regulations, is the



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*Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM)* of 2016, which provides in section D.4 criteria for the appointment of educators for examination-related work. As the marking of examination scripts forms an integral part of any assessment process, it is accepted that the NSC regulations establish guidelines to ensure the quality of marking and the credibility of the NSC examination, while PAM provides criteria for the appointment of markers.

In 2012, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2012, s. 6.2.3) conceded that “some divergent practices regarding a number of the marking processes” exists and indicated that a manual, aimed at standardising the marking process across all provinces, had been developed. Whilst this process was earmarked for implementation in 2013, in 2014 the NSC regulations were adopted. However, despite procedures to regulate assessment, several concerns have been raised about the standard of the NSC examination process. These concerns include, non-transparency in the statistical adjustment of NSC marks (Loock, 2013), the poor quality of results (Du Plessis, 2014), and the unequal treatment of learners, based on their home language (Du Plessis, Steyn & Weideman, 2016). Concerns about the NSC examination that have been persistently reported in the media range from the qualifications of markers, their competence in terms of subject knowledge and the language they mark (*Beeld*, 17 December 2011; *Beeld*, 25 April 2012), insensitivity in the content of question papers (SABC News, 2014), to the leaking of examination papers (SABC News, 2016). Although the media reports are anecdotal, they contribute towards public perceptions of the trustworthiness of the NSC examination. On a more official level, Umalusi highlights in their annual reports various areas of concern and non-compliance, ranging from aspects related to the moderation of question papers, to the monitoring of marking, and to the selection, appointment and training of markers (Umalusi, 2015; 2017). As noted by Umalusi, “[e]vidence gathered over the years suggests that inconsistency in the marking of NSC scripts decreases the fairness and reliability of marks awarded to candidates, and therefore threatens the validity of the examinations (Umalusi, 2017:35).

Internationally a wealth of studies have been conducted on various aspects of the marking of high-stakes examinations (Barkaoui, 2011; Bloxham, Den-Outer, Hudson & Price, 2016). In South Africa, however, despite some scholarly research on the NSC examination (Du Plessis, Steyn & Weideman, 2016; Loock, 2013), little research has been undertaken, particularly in the Northern Cape Province on the possible threats to the integrity of the examination. This article is subsequently exploratory in nature as it aims at exploring NSC marking in the Northern Cape about which very little information is available (cf. Fouché, 2005: 109; Strydom, 2013: 152). Given the persistency of the complaints about the NSC examination as an exit point examination, and since very little is known about the possible threats to the integrity of the examination, the aim of this paper is to explore people’s perceptions of the threats to the standard of the marking of the NSC examination in the Northern Cape. The decision to work with the Northern Cape was informed by the fact that every province is primarily responsible for managing its own NSC examinations according to province-specific directives (DBE, 2014, chap. 7, s. 36). The intention, however, was not to investigate the accuracy of the marking or the entire examination process, but rather to explore the perceived factors that could potentially threaten the standard of the marking and subsequently jeopardise the reliability and credibility of results.

## 2. Conceptual framework

This article centres on the possible threats to the standard of marking. Although the aim is not to comment on the quality of marking itself, it is important to consider the notions “quality in education” and “high standard of marking”. Our contention is that an understanding of these notions would highlight the threats to the standard of NSC marking.

### Quality and standards in education

The concept of quality and standards is generally rather vague and difficult to define because its meaning depends on its context, as well as its relative and value-laden nature (Elassy, 2015; Tikly & Barrett, 2007). Nonetheless, in the literature, “quality” is conceptualised in terms of fitness for purpose, transformation, excellence, exceptional and zero error (Nicholson, 2011), relevance and sustainability (Barrett, Chawla-Duggan, Lowe, Nickel & Ukpo, 2006); responsiveness and reflexivity (Nickel & Lowe, 2010); and being up to standard, purposeful, exceptional, and having accountability (Schindler, Puls-Elvidge Welzant & Crawford, 2015). The concept of quality (and standards), therefore, have many connotations.

Defining quality *in* and *of* education is equally difficult due to the fact that, in education, “quality concerns cannot be confined to only one aspect of education as all the elements associated with educational quality are interrelated” (Dare in Anekeya, 2015:46). Tikly and Barrett (2007; Sayed & Ahmed, 2011), however, identify three approaches that influence the current perceptions of quality in education and of the quality of education, namely: the human capital approach, the human rights approach and the social justice approach. Whilst the human capital perspective highlights education’s contribution to the economy, the human rights approach emphasises education as a basic human right. In contrast, the social justice approach foregrounds participation and the voice of the marginalised as being imperative to quality education. These approaches largely correspond with the view and expectation that SA education should contribute towards the economy (DoE, 1996b, s.4[b]), that education is a basic human right (RSA 1996, s.29), and that education is in principle also a social justice issue (DoE, 1995, chap. 4, s.4).

However, quality education has the potential to transform an education system and to redress inequalities that are specifically significant for SA education. In particular, the appeal for quality in education relates to its use as a desirable goal for education, to secure distributional justice and equality, and to serve as a justification for the reorganisation and restructuring of education (Sayed, 2001). Although the concept of quality appears not to be explicitly defined in SA policy documents, a good quality of education is linked to the capacity and commitment of the teacher, the appropriateness of the curriculum, the way in which standards are set and assessed and the efficiency and productivity of the system (DoE, 1995, chap. 4, ss.4; 5; 9). In essence, quality in SA education resonates strongly with the system’s transformative vision articulated in the *South African Schools Act* whereby the government commits itself to:

*redress past injustices in educational provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners and in so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people’s talents and capabilities (DoE, 1996a, Preamble).*

### A high quality of marking

If quality in SA education relates to the way in which “standards are set and assessed” (DoE, 1996a, chap. 4), then it can be assumed that quality marking will involve more than the mere

judging of individual students' performance, their achievement of learning goals and the worth of their responses (Ramnarain, 2014). Rather, a high standard of marking, by implication, should also reflect the integrity, the efficiency and productivity of the education system – a high standard of marking is thus an indispensable part of quality education.

A high quality of marking is generally associated with concepts such as accuracy, reliability, fairness, efficiency and consistency (Killen, 2010; Ofqual, 2013b). However, the achievement of these concepts within the context of a high standard of marking depends not only on robust systems and controls (that promote good marking, and identify and remedy poor marking), but also on marking undertaken by skilled and experienced examiners (Ofqual, 2013a; HKEAA, 2014). Accordingly, we agree with Ahmed and Pollit (2011:259) who maintain that it is not only “futile to design excellent assessment tasks if an equal amount of care is not also put into the marking process”.

The DBE (2011:32) views marking as “a meticulous and systematic process that is based on a reasoned judgement based on learner evidence and agreed standards”. The DBE further explains that good marking should be accurate and reliable and aim to produce valid and reliable results (DBE, 2012; 2016a). This implies that the marking process should produce results that are not only accepted as an accurate reflection of a candidate's efforts, but which also demonstrate that the marking process is not tainted – something which could have a serious impact on the quality and standard of the entire examination process and on perceptions about the education system.

### **3. RESEARCH STRATEGY**

#### **Participants**

In this qualitative study, eight participants were purposively selected because of their rich knowledge regarding the different aspects of marking. The participants consisted of one internal moderator, one chief marker and one senior marker, one centre manager, one curriculum official, one school principal and two union members from two different unions (“union member A” and “union member B”). The selection of participants was based on the assumption that they were best positioned to draw on knowledge and experience of the marking process and would therefore be able to provide rich and relevant information (Maree & Pietersen, 2016).

#### **Data sources**

Data was generated through semi-structured interviews. This decision was premised on the understanding that interviews would provide a platform for the participants to construct and present their own opinions of the marking process and perceived threats to the quality thereof (Flick, 2018; Seidman, 2013). Written informed consent was sought from each participant. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Free State and permission to undertake this study was granted by the Head of the Northern Cape Department of Basic Education (NCDBE). The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed.

#### **Data analysis and ensuring integrity**

We used thematic data analysis that enabled us to draw various themes from the data. Trustworthiness was ensured by objectively examining the data. While we were guided by the results rather than by pre-conceived notions, we ensured that the results were not the product of research design errors or misunderstandings that could have influenced our interpretation

of the data. We subsequently remained committed to intellectual honesty by leaving a clear audit trail. Sufficient, detailed descriptions of the data were collected and reported in context to allow judgements about transferability by the reader (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).

## 4. FINDINGS

Our findings are organised around three themes namely: perceptions about the appointment of markers, marker competence and confidence in the marking process. Although discussed separately, these themes are not only interrelated, but point towards how to establish a high standard of marking and indicate the public's opinion of the standard and value of the NSC examination.

### Appointment of markers

From the data, it seems that some participants are not convinced that objective criteria and strategies for the ranking and evaluation of markers are always used to ensure that the best candidates are selected. While union member A raised the concern that appointments are not always based on objective criteria because "personal feelings from departmental officials play a big role during the selection and appointment", the senior marker was uncertain of "whether the department pays attention to that evaluation form" during the selection of markers. In fact, the senior marker justified this perception by indicating that, "some markers who have been evaluated as poor during the previous marking session, just get re-appointed and even promoted to the next level in the marking". The selection of markers and the process of their appointment seem to be clouded in secrecy, as it is uncertain "what criteria are used during the selection ... and the department never gives reasons" (chief marker). Various participants corroborate this perception: while union member B expressed uncertainty in the words: "I don't actually even know what informs the ranking [of potential markers]", the centre manager stated: "how they [the selection committee] select, I don't know." The problem with regard to the ranking and evaluation of markers is succinctly captured by the observation that "there is no transparency from the department" (union member A). Concerns regarding the lack of objectivity and transparency, including the secretive nature of the selection of markers and the process of appointing them, seem to feed into another frustration, expressed by the chief marker: "there is no platform to raise these issues."

In addition to the lack of transparency, the participants also indicated that the selection process is often hampered by imperatives of equity and representivity that need to be considered during the appointment of markers. The perception is that the appointment of competent markers is often subject to these imperatives. One union member in particular noted that, "issues of representivity, equity and the likes are the cause that [sic] teachers who are not competent get appointed". This perception was corroborated by the chief marker who observed that, "sometimes your strong markers are from the same district but then you must swop (change) them for someone from another district. This means that, because of district representation, you must swop a good marker for a bad marker". By implication, it can be assumed that when the appointment of markers does not seek to appoint the best markers within the parameters of equity imperatives, the quality of marking will be open to attack.

A third factor that came to the fore during the interviews was that teachers' unions seem to exert undue power and influence on the selection and appointment of markers. While the chief marker conceded that, "they [the unions] are fully taking part [sic] in the selection of markers",

the one union member explained their involvement by saying, “[w]e are invited to the selection meeting during which we look at the experience, qualifications and the grades taught by the markers”. Interestingly, however, the chief marker noted that, “[t]eacher unions are supposed to be observers only. But as far as I am concerned for all the time that I was there, they were fully taking part [sic] in the selection of markers”. The notion that the involvement of teachers’ unions exceeds mere observation was further supported by the curriculum official who indicated that, “the department wants to use pass results [of the learners in the subject taught by the potential marker] as [a] criterion for selection, but one teacher union do [sic] not agree with this”. Union member B expressed the union’s discontent with the selection criteria: “the ranking is really unfair ... as well as the 60% [pass rate required to be selected as a marker].” While union member B boasted that, “we ensure that the right people are appointed”, the chief marker foregrounded the problem with the unions’ involvement in his words, “the department would compromise to the unions [decide in favour of the unions] ... they would take somebody else instead.”

### Marker competence

Concerns about the quality of marking seem to be further complemented by reservations about the competency of some markers. In particular, the internal moderator expressed the opinion that the language competency of appointed markers was, “a great headache, especially in the Northern Cape.” The senior marker supported this concern, observing that markers appointed without the necessary language competency, “struggle with the language they don’t understand and penalise the learners unfairly”. The internal moderator corroborated this, by citing various examples to indicate how markers “fail to recognise synonyms which learners are using and regard it as not the correct word that is used [sic] in the memo, therefore marking it wrong”, and how:

*... learners [from Namaqualand] use a different type of Afrikaans expressions [sic] than the Kimberley learners but their answers are not wrong ... the English markers do not understand and therefore disadvantage the learners unfairly and cause huge mark differences.*

In addition to the issue of language competency, the participants also raised concerns about markers’ knowledge of the contents of the subject they marked and their qualifications. The importance of content knowledge was emphasised by the senior marker and the internal moderator. While the former indicated that “the lack of content knowledge disadvantage [sic] learners”, the latter was of the opinion that, “the selection committee should consider subject content knowledge”. The senior marker equally underscored the importance of content knowledge, and by implication, foregrounded such knowledge as a prerequisite for a good standard of marking: “markers should have a subject-related degree which helps [them] to have a better understanding of the content knowledge”. Such a prerequisite is also implicitly supported by the internal moderator who blames the poor quality of marking on a lack of knowledge of the contents of the subject in that “big differences are only picked up during the re-mark from those who struggle with the content”.

The data also revealed that various participants regard a marker’s teaching experience and relevant qualifications as important prerequisites for good marking. In this regard, the internal moderator was of the opinion that the selection committee should “look more thoroughly to [sic] qualifications” and the senior marker observed that, “the person must be qualified and must teach the subject”. Although some respondents were in favour of the current requirement

of a two-year minimum teaching experience for markers, the school principal felt that, “a person must at least have taught the subject for a minimum [of] three years before that person can mark”. The chief marker shared the view that “two years of experience ... is not enough”.

It seems that a marker’s competence is being threatened by his or her poor language competence, his or her lack of content knowledge and insufficient teaching experience. As a result of these concerns, some participants are in favour of the implementation of a competency test for markers. Although the senior marker agreed with the chief marker that a competency test is “the only fair process to appoint markers” and that it “should determine the content knowledge of markers”, the chief marker warns that such a test “must just not be used to discriminate against markers”.

### **Confidence in the quality of marking**

The data revealed that the majority of participants had reservations about the quality of the marking in the Northern Cape. While the internal moderator doubted the marking “because my involvement with the re-marks show [sic] how many mistakes slipped through”, the chief marker expressed a similar concern because “of the mistakes that I’ve picked up during the re-mark sessions. I’ve seen during re-marking the errors which was [sic] made by the markers”. The centre manager unequivocally expressed the opinion that “the quality of marking is not good”, while the senior maker’s doubt stemmed from “fear of the English-speaking markers who are incompetent in the language [Afrikaans]”. Even the school principal doubted the quality of the marking: “yes, I do have doubts because I know [some] of [the] markers who just couldn’t cope”. It is interesting, however, to note that, contrary to the views of the majority of the participants, the two union members were unanimous in that they did not “doubt the quality of marking” (union member A).

The participants highlighted various factors that might influence the quality of marking and that could indirectly feed into the lack of confidence in this regard. A lack of commitment by the markers was foregrounded as a possible threat to the quality of marking. Union member A announced that, “some are committed but there are those who are just there for the sake of the money” and union member B shared a similar opinion: “the salary definitely has an impact ... because they are there just for the money”. The perception that markers are only concerned about the money they earn, was corroborated by the curriculum official who felt that, “the money part will always be the driving force”. Another factor that could also be linked to a perceived lack of the markers’ commitment is the centre manager’s observation that, “you can see how relaxed and ‘don’t care’ the markers are with regards to the importance of their duties”. More than one participant observed how the markers were “too [much] in a rush to get finished and miss out on the importance to do [sic] a proper job” (senior marker) and how they “get more relaxed as the marking progress [sic] and then loiter around on the *stoep* and to [sic] the cafeteria” (centre manager).

Two other factors of concern, which might have a possible detrimental impact on the quality of marking, are the number of scripts moderated and the conditions under which marking often takes place. The data reveal that some participants shared a similar view, “The 10% moderation is not enough to track down all mistakes of markers” (internal moderator). The chief marker also conceded that, “the 10% moderation is not enough and more scripts need to be moderated in order to eliminate the mistakes done by markers”. It appears that there might not be a sufficient number of scripts currently moderated during the marking process and subsequently the senior marker is compelled to ask the question: “Only 10%

is moderated, so what happens to the unmoderated scripts?" In addition, the physical space for marking and, in particular, unbearably high temperatures in rooms with no air conditioning seem to be of concern to some participants. The chief marker noted how markers are forced to "keep on taking breaks to get some fresh air because of the heat", while the senior marker suggested that "the department [should] arrange extra fans because not all schools have air conditioning". In line with their general concern for workers, the two union members were sympathetic towards the fact that, according to union member A, "Teachers sacrifice a lot away from home and they should be comfortable". Union member B also felt that, "The department should do more to make the markers comfortable".

## 5. DISCUSSION

Three themes and related concerns emerged from the findings, namely the appointment of markers, the markers' competence and confidence in the quality of the marking. The discussion of the findings subsequently pivots on these themes.

### The appointment of markers

Markers are at the centre of the marking exercise and are fundamental to ensuring consistent performance in the selection process (Lumley in Barkaoui, 2011). The selection of competent markers assumes that the selection of markers and the appointment processes be guided by criteria that are clear, transparent and consistently applied. By implication, it can be said that markers with the necessary language proficiency and knowledge of the content of the subject ought to be appointed.

The NSC Regulations (DBE 2014, s.4.4) provide for the appointment of competent markers with:

*a recognised three-year post-school qualification which must include the subject concerned at second or third year level or other appropriate post matric qualifications; appropriate teaching experience, including teaching experience at the appropriate level, in the subject concerned and language competency.*

Although the minimum requirements for the appointment of markers are clearly laid down, the data revealed that these criteria are not consistently applied. While markers without the basic qualifications and competencies are appointed, the NCDBE's process of appointing markers is not always transparent. The problem with the appointment of markers seems to be persistent in the Northern Cape, despite clear guidelines provided for marker selection and appointment (cf. DBE, 2016b). In 2015, Umalusi reported that in the Northern Cape, "not all marker applications contained verifiable academic records". In 2017, Umalusi reported in a similar vein that the appointment of markers in the Northern Cape deviated from the sub-criteria, as the qualifications of many applicants could not be verified. In the absence of transparency, incompetent and poorly qualified markers can be appointed. Although the application of equity and redress imperatives, as is mandated by the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996), remains important in the selection and appointment of markers, care should be taken that appointments be aligned with the recognition of the significance of the NSC examination, both for the learner, the integrity of the examination process, as well as for the development of the country.

The findings also reveal that teachers' unions are actively involved and participate in the appointment of markers. However, such involvement has been criticised because the appointment of teachers in some provinces is controlled and inappropriately influenced by



particular teachers' unions, and that posts are literally sold to the highest bidder (DBE, 2016a). Moreover, marking the NSC is financially rewarding and potential markers do anything to get appointed, even if they are not linguistically capable or if they lack the relevant experience or content knowledge to mark the assigned scripts. By implication, any unethical involvement of teachers' unions in the Northern Cape that leads to the appointment of incompetent NSC markers has the potential to contaminate the entire marking process. Section 4.4.6 of Annexure K of the NSC Regulations, states specifically that the direct involvement of teachers' unions in the selection and appointment of markers should be that of observers (DBE, 2014). However, it seems that this regulation is not adhered to in the Northern Cape and, by implication, the non-adherence to NSC regulations violates the very aim of the regulations, namely to "regulate and control the administration, management and conduct of the National Senior Certificate examination and assessment process" (DBE, 2014, chap. 1, s.2).

### **Markers' competence**

The DBE (2016a, 15) concedes that the "quality of marking is dependent on the competency and expertise of the markers appointed". To ensure that competent and experienced markers are appointed, the DBE audits the process to select the markers across all provinces (DBE, 2016a). With regard to ensuring the quality of marking of the NSC examinations, Umalusi foregrounds the importance of verifying the selection of markers and their subsequent training as "[i]nconsistency in the marking of scripts has a negative impact on fairness and reliability of marks awarded to candidates and thus thwarts the validity of the examinations" (Umalusi, 2017, 35). Although Suto and Nadas (2008) maintain that a teacher's experience does not contribute to his or her marking accurately, Elander and Hardman (in Baird, Greatorex & Bell, 2004) find that markers who have taught the subject before can apply wider criteria when marking and consequently contribute towards fair marking. Similarly, Yorke, Bridges and Woolf (2000) maintain that a marker's experience and expertise have an impact on the quality of marking. What is more, experienced and competent teachers not only ensure valid marking, but experience and competence are also desirable characteristics that ensure good quality in education (EFA-Global Monitoring Report, 2005). As such, the appointment of experienced markers serves not only to ensure quality marking and to do justice to candidates, but it also enhances the quality of education. In this regard, some participants advocated a test of markers' competency and this highlights the fact that the implementation of such a test is of national importance. One of the advantages of such a test is that it could ensure that the markers who comply with the basic requirements for appointment are competent enough to mark.

Knowledge of the content of the subject is also significant for a high quality of marking. Jaeger (in Barret, 2001) maintains that reliability can only be expected if markers are highly knowledgeable in the subject that they mark. Similarly, Suto, Nadas and Bell (2011) regard a marker's highest qualification in a relevant subject as being a better predictor of accuracy. It can thus be assumed that a good quality of marking and reliable NSC results rely on markers who have the relevant qualifications and knowledge of the subject. Relevant knowledge of the subject will enable markers to get a better grasp of the responses of candidates. South African teachers are constantly accused of having poor knowledge of their subject (Spaull, 2013). To improve teachers' performance (also in NSC marking), the National Development Plan (RSA, 2012) proposes that teachers be supported in terms of their knowledge of the subject they teach. The DBE (2010) also believes that teachers with little knowledge of the subject they teach are unable to handle problem solving and the critical thinking of learner's responses. Findings from a study conducted by Carnoy, Chisholm and Chilisa (in Heystek & Minnaar, 2015) confirm that learners'

poor performance and low scores in particular subjects are directly related to inadequately qualified teachers. The link between poor performance and teacher inadequacy is recognised in the selection and appointment of markers for the NSC examinations in that specific criteria are associated with qualifications and extensive experience in a particular subject (DBE, 2016b). However, the participants' concerns about markers' knowledge of contents of the subjects they marked and their qualifications align with non-compliance by the Northern Cape as reported by Umalusi in 2015. Umalusi reported that the pass rate criterion was not consistently applied in the Northern Cape as some applicants were appointed to the position of senior marker in Mathematics, despite having pass rates as low as 25% in 2014. In 2017, "[a]pplicants who lacked subject qualifications were appointed as markers or senior markers for Geography, History and Mathematical Literacy" (Umalusi, 2017, 40). The appointment of markers who lack subject qualifications contravenes the stipulation in PAM (DBE, 2016b, ssD.4.2.3.1 & D.4.2.3.2). According to which an appointee must have "a recognised three year post grade 12 qualification, which must include the subject concerned at second or third year level" (section) and "extensive experience as an educator in the particular subject or a related area and at least two years teaching or other curriculum-related experience within the last 5 years at the appropriate level". This state of affairs foregrounds the cautiousness with which the selection of markers and their appointment should be approached.

In South African education, the link between quality and the teacher's capacity and commitment (DoE, 1995, chap. 4) underscores such cautiousness – the appointment of teachers without the necessary knowledge of their subject, and without sufficient proficiency in language will seriously threaten not only the quality of marking, but also the integrity of the NSC. The opposite could also be assumed – that the appointment of competent markers will not only significantly contribute to accurate, reliable, fair, efficient and consistent judgement of a learner's achievement, but will also have the potential to restore the public's trust in the NSC examination.

### **Confidence in the quality of marking**

General confidence in the quality of marking seems to be problematic. It could thus be assumed that the lack of transparency in the appointment of markers and, what is more, the appointment of incompetent markers threatens the quality of marking. Although the appointment of incompetent markers feeds the perceptions and experiences that undermine confidence in the marking process, other factors also contribute toward the lack of confidence in the quality of marking. Markers work in difficult conditions, which include long hours, cramped venues that are blisteringly hot. Bearing in mind that the Northern Cape is one of the hottest provinces in South Africa, these concerns could have an impact on the quality of marking. Wolfe, Moulder and Myford (2001) find that a marker's accuracy, reliability and quality decrease over time. Klein and El (2003) note that papers marked earlier in a marking session are awarded significantly lower marks than papers marked later in the session. Physical factors also play a significant role in the efficiency with which marking takes place and, in this regard, Plake (in Barret, 2001) contends that markers' inconsistencies could be exacerbated by fatigue during the marking process. In a similar vein, Aslett's (2006) opinion is that a lack of sleep affects markers' vigilance, attention, logical reasoning and rational thinking – all skills that are necessary for sound judgement of a candidate's work and that enhance the quality of marking. In other words, if conditions of marking are not favourable, as indicated by the participants, the quality of marking will indeed be jeopardised.

Another significant concern that affects the quality of marking is that only 10% of randomly selected marked scripts are moderated. Moderation ensures equity, accountability, reliability, fairness, consistency and community building (Bloxham, Hughes & Adie, 2015). Moderation also enables one to detect and rectify marking mistakes, which if not detected, could have a distressing impact on a candidate's mark. While the participants raised concerns about the small percentage of scripts that are moderated, it is interesting to note that Bloxham (2009) also criticises the moderation of only 10% of scripts, claiming that this percentage is based on the assumption that 10% of a sample is true of the whole. The assumption that a sample does in fact represent the whole implies that all scripts were marked consistently, accurately and fairly. However, when one considers the problems related to the selection and appointment of competent marks, including the difficulties with language competence, and the dire conditions under which markers often have to work, it is highly unlikely that quality marking is consistently done during the Northern Cape NSC marking process.

## **6. IMPLICATIONS FOR NSC MARKING**

In drawing on the discussion of the possible threats to quality NSC marking in the Northern Cape province, we conclude this article by proposing some recommendations to address the identified threats to quality marking in the province. Although the study was undertaken in one province only, it is likely that these threats may be equally prevalent in other provinces. This means that these recommendations are not relevant to the Northern Cape only. Given the concerns about the appointment of competent markers, it is recommended that the NCDBE should ensure that the minimum requirements to qualify as a marker be adhered to. In addition, measures should also be put into place to ensure that markers' language competency and knowledge of the subject they are marking are excellent and that administrative requirements are followed. We recommend the implementation of a competency test to assist with the selection of teachers that are qualified to be appointed as markers. We also propose that the perceived involvement of teachers' unions be restricted to observation by aligning the selection process with NSC regulations. In order to improve marking conditions and, by implication, strengthen markers' confidence in the marking process, it is recommended that attention be given to the circumstances under which markers are expected to work. This includes factors such as physical conditions and the marking period itself to limit fatigue and improve vigilance, logical reasoning and rational thinking during the marking process. It is important to ensure that marking conditions at marking centres are as favourable possible in order to enhance the quality of marking. If the quality, thus including the consistency of marking, is enhanced, then the moderation of only 10% of the scripts can be justified. However, as the present lack of confidence in the marking process is supported by concerns regarding the small percentage of scripts moderated, it is recommended that a larger percentage of scripts be moderated, under improved circumstances, at the marking centres. As the percentage of scripts moderated is linked to the extent to which marking is done consistently, it is important to ensure consistency in marking in order to do justice to the moderation of scripts.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This article was premised on the assumption that the NSC examination serves as a measure of the quality and effectiveness of the entire education system, and by implication, an indication of the extent to which quality education contributes towards a more equitable education system. If the quality of the examination process is placed under suspicion, it can have dire consequences for learners' access to institutions of higher learning, their future prospects in

the work place, but also for the development of the country. Given public concerns about the NSC examination, areas of concern that is annually highlighted by Umalusi and the perceived threats emanating from the research findings, it is assumed that the value of attending to these potential threats could be two-fold: it could contribute towards restoring confidence in the NSC examination and in the entire South African education system.

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