

**SPEECH BY HON NICO SMIT MP IN MOTIVATION OF
THE MOTION ON EDUCATION**

18 FEBRUARY 2021

Hon Speaker, Hon Members, I rise today **with a truly heavy heart** to speak to the motion on our broken education system and the irreparable damage that has been done in the course of thirty years to the futures of the children of Namibia. It seems to me that the situation is now so dire that I'm not even sure that there is any way to fix it – at least not for the thousands of children who have now discovered that they have lost the chance to obtain a tertiary education.

Hon Speaker, **the chaos that reigns at the Ministry of Education regarding the future of the grade 11s is an absolute disgrace.** As late as yesterday morning there was still no guidance for schools about who would be allowed back to do AS (Advanced Standard) and who would be relegated to the street corners. The press release sent out by the Ministry last Friday simply added to the confusion, with it being interpreted in various ways by various schools.

On Tuesday schools who inquired about who qualified for AS were told

only learners who achieved at least 2 C's and 3 D's in 2020 can continue, as long as one of those D's was for English, which is now a compulsory subject for AS. If a learner has only 2 C's and one is for English, they cannot continue because then they only have two subjects instead of the minimum of three subjects.

I am sure many of you have children or grandchildren or other family who wrote grade 11 last year. When you consider the following regulations, **you may find on this coming Monday when you try to send your child or other family member back to school that he or she is turned away because they don't qualify despite having an average of D.**

As matters stood on Tuesday according to the Ministry of Education, there are **two hurdles for these learners to cross before being allowed to register for AS – the gateway to proper tertiary education at degree level.** First the learner must qualify by obtaining certain symbols for his or her five best subjects. **The first guidance was that only learners with three or more C's could qualify if one of the C's was for English. Then this was changed so that if you got three C's and a D for English, you could continue with the D.**

Consider this scenario: **your learner achieved an A for Maths, a B for English, and three D's for other subjects, you did not qualify to continue. In other words, the Ministry decided on behalf of the learners that they were not clever enough to improve their marks in AS. But there is also no way they can return to school to repeat grade 11 if they turn 18 during 2021.**

To add to the confusion, it is also unclear whether they may enrol at Namcol to improve the subjects for which they obtained D's. The Honourable **Minister should also inform this house and all the parents out there what the pass rate for grade 11 was at Namcol in 2020** – I still cannot understand why the Ministry believes that, if a learner was unable to qualify for AS while attending full time face-to-face classes at school, they are likely to do so when studying without this support from home.

Let me return to the second hurdle the grade 11's must cross to qualify for AS. If they obtained three C's and two D's, they may only continue with the three subjects for which they obtained C's – the subjects for which they obtained D's may not be studied at AS level, unless the D was for English. **This despite the fact that they may have obtained 59% for those subjects – normally a D is between 50 and 59%.** This sounds extremely arbitrary to me! **And why would a learner who under the old curriculum passed grade 11 with an average of E (or 40%) and then went on to pass grade 12 now suddenly be unable to do the same under the new curriculum?**

Hon Speaker, Hon Members, on inquiry the Ministry was unable to explain what was to become of the thousands of learners who had been excluded from furthering their studies by these arbitrary and, frankly, illogical qualification requirements. To study at NUST for a diploma or certificate, a grade 11 ordinary level learner requires 25 points. Three C's would give you 15 points and three D's would give you another 12, so you would qualify. But what about the learner who got 1 C, 2 D's and

2 E's?

What has become of the good old days, when a learner required an average of 40% (E) over 6 subjects to qualify to study grade 12? This gave the learner the chance to pull up his socks, study hard and obtain the required symbols that would give him or her entry to university. I also have it on good authority that the pass mark for AS is probably not much more than 45% - so what are these draconian rules for grade 11 about?

Hon. Speaker, there is then the added confusion around whether Grade 11 learners who wrote the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (NSSCO) will be able to be admitted into institutions of Higher Learning. The biggest university in the country, namely the University of Namibia (UNAM) has blatantly rejected the possibility of admitting the Grade 11 NSSCO learners.

Of course, these learners may enrol at the International University of Management (IUM) or the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST). However, they may never be able to register for any postgraduate qualification in SADC or overseas after they have completed their undergraduate qualifications. These learners will therefore be stranded and frustrated, unable to further their education.

Hon. Speaker, one then questions the credibility of the consultative process that the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture undertook with the higher education sector. The nation needs answers as to what factors informed the necessity for Grade 11 as an exit grade to university.

Hon Speaker, you may remember that in September 2019 I questioned the then Deputy Minister Hon Nghipondoka about exactly these issues, and she was quick to assure me **that the new curriculum would give many more learners access to tertiary education than the so-called legacy curriculum.** As mentioned in my motion, **under the old curriculum, between 25 000 and 28 000 learners went on to grade 12.** As you know, a mere 5 000 learners met the original criteria for AS, a figure that rose to about 7 000 when the qualification was lowered to allow learners with a D for English to also continue to AS. **So how did this advantage our children?**

Hon Speaker, don't misunderstand me here – **this new curriculum is a good curriculum; it just doesn't work for Namibian conditions.** I am told that if you are clever, hard-working learner, who qualified for 5 subjects, then you have your own unique problems, again created by the Ministry of Education. **I am told that such a learner must then find schools – in the plural – that offer the subjects he or she wants to take, because a school like Delta, for example, no longer offers accounting at AS level, while various other schools no longer offer subjects like physics or chemistry because they don't have the teachers with the necessary qualifications to teach at this level.** What, Hon Speaker, is then the situation in rural areas? How will the ministry handle this? **How can a learner be expected to do three subjects at Windhoek High School and then go to a different school for physics and another school for chemistry, just as examples?**

After reviewing the questions I asked the Hon Deputy Minister in September 2019, as well as her answers, I must come to only one conclusion. I was trying to alert the Hon Minister at the time, a year before the learners were to write the grade 11 exam, of the dangers, hurdles and pitfalls that awaited her. But her answers to me made it clear that, with the usual hubris of the ruling party, the attitude of 'they know everything about everything and the opposition parties know nothing and need not be listened to', her Ministry fell into every trap I pointed out! And the result is there for us all to see and for thousands of our children to experience – the denial of a further school education.

Perhaps the Hon Minister would like to inform this August House how all these learners out of school will improve the lack of skills Namibia already suffers from? How can we improve our staggering economy with uneducated children?

❖ In September 2019, when I questioned the Hon Minister about the research done regarding the introduction of this new curriculum, **she gave this August House a two page answer riddled with jargon and complicated explanations which I'm pretty sure few people listened to or understood.** This answer looks and sound completely above board, **but today, with hindsight, it is once again clear that the Ministry has managed to make the wrong decision. This once again a demonstration of the adage: It's not what you don't know (or understand) that matters; it's what you don't know you don't know!**

❖ The same lack of understanding regarding the consequences of

decisions has been proven by the Hon Minister's answer to my question about the advantages for learners of the new curriculum. **Once again reality has shown this answer to be a nonsense: a mere 7 000 learners will be continuing to AS and tertiary education at degree level instead of the 25 000 – 28 000 of the past.** I quote the Minister's answer to me: **"The reform will therefore expand access to NSSCAS to even formerly disadvantaged communities and increase the output to universities compared to the previous situation where some regions did not even have a school offering higher level qualifications"**. This is an interesting statement about schools offering higher level qualifications: The Hon Minister must please inform this August House how many teachers in the Ministry's employ are in fact properly and adequately qualified to teach at AS level as I know for a fact that some of the private schools are having difficulty in this regard. It is my understanding, as I mentioned ~~above~~, that a very limited number of government schools will be offering certain subjects at Higher level; **this does not sound like "increasing access to NSSCAS to more learners, especially in rural areas"**.

- ❖ This leads me to wonder once again whether this is all this **government's plan to force Namibian learners out of school a year early to save money?** I also asked in 2019 whether the idea was to force learners to attend Namibian institutions of higher learning. There is nothing wrong with that, yet **reality has shown us that not even our own institutions want to accept learners who have only completed their subjects at Ordinary level.** Let me again quote the

Hon Minister's very confident reply to my question regarding this issue in 2019: **"The revised curriculum...is rather aimed at improving quality and increasing the output of learners completing secondary school with higher qualifications (NSSCAS)..."**.

- ❖ Let me emphasize, once again, that if the Hon Minister and her advisors in the ministry of education had displayed the required competence to make the right decisions regarding the implementation of this new curriculum, the present disastrous state of affairs and much heartbreak and confusion for thousands of our children could have been avoided.
- ❖ It is of the utmost importance that **this government learns to operate in a bi-partisan manner when far-reaching decisions of national importance are being made.** After 30 years of bungling – you need only look at 99 per cent of the SOE's and the way they have been managed to see this for yourself – it is surely time to admit that there is a huge amount of expertise and know-how going to waste in this country simply because of the way in which the ruling party Swapo exercises its determination to hang onto the bone at all costs, like a lion with its prey!

Hon Speaker, Hon Members, let it not be said that I only rise to spread doom and gloom! **Allow me to also offer an immediate solution to the present disastrous situation in which thousands of our children find themselves.**

It is my considered opinion that the Ministry must, before Monday, that was now yesterday, when the government schools open, cancel

the requirements for progressing to AS. Allow all learners who wrote the grade 11 exam and obtained a 40% average in 6 subjects, including English, to continue to AS if they so wish. If the Ministry wanted to apply these stringent and, frankly, unfair rules, they should have thought the matter through when we brought it up in 2019 and they should have made the rules known to all schools at the beginning of 2020, so that teachers, learners and parents knew what they were in for. The fact that they are running around since yesterday in a state of panic is clear proof that the necessary planning was not done in this regard.

Hon Speaker, Hon Members, the PDM, and before it the DTA, have been trying to convince the Ministry of Education for 30 years that they are on the wrong track regarding education. Already when His Excellency, President Nujoma ran the country, we submitted a document to his Commission of Inquiry suggesting a different approach, but once again, that attitude of 'we know everything and you know nothing' meant that it was disregarded and education started on its long journey to disaster – rather like the path followed by Air Namibia, from a going concern to a basket case!

Please allow me to sum up what that document said 30 years ago – guidance that most educators (including the late President Robert Mugabe!) agree with. The fact is that you cannot build a house without foundations, yet that is what we are determined to do in Namibia, with the disastrous results we are seeing today.

The urgent need is for the teachers in the pre-primary and primary phase of our system to be intensively trained, for there to be no more than 25 children in any classroom in the primary school, and for automatic promotion to be done away with. This is the phase where children learn to read with understanding, calculate with understanding and write with sense – **the three R's in education that forms the basis thereof.** When the teacher is untrained in these very difficult skills and is also expected to control 50+ small children, the result is obvious. Hon Speaker, I wonder how many people are aware of how many children turn up in grade 8 unable to read, write legibly and do the most basic arithmetic, let alone maths and that 30 years after independence?

This government has been failing our children for the last 30 years, because it has politicised our education system. When Mr Nahas Angula and his British advisors took it upon themselves to summarily change our high school curriculum this was the start of the rot. And it was done because they wanted to ensure that the high school learners who turned 18 would continue to vote for the ruling party.

This disastrous situation has simply become worse and worse, bolstered by automatic promotion – this meant that whether you could actually read, write or understand any of what your teachers had supposedly taught you, you moved up to the next grade. I think the result is clear – our children have become like hamsters on a treadmill – they learn very little at school, and those that cannot qualify for degrees in medicine, or commerce or the humanities – they become teachers and simply

perpetuate the bad teaching they experienced when they were at school.

Hon Speaker, my plea to this August House today is that we stop this rot in our education at once and give our children a real chance at a real education. We need to refer this whole issue of our education system to an independent commission that can come up with a way to reverse the disastrous situation we find ourselves in. We must throw everything we have at fixing our pre- and primary schools and our pre- and primary school teacher training. We must raise the entry qualifications for teachers – in Finland, for example, only students with the highest marks are allowed to train as teachers, unlike in Namibia! And we must stop automatic promotion!

Perhaps then Namibia will once again start producing quality learners who are able to hold their own at any tertiary institution and in any sphere of work.

I thank you

