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Busschau, William John

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The Quality of MATRICULANTS

by W. J. BUSSCHAU

PERHAPS it is a natural historical process that each generation on reaching maturity should regard the following one as inferior in character, quality and performance. No doubt the old do forget what they were like when young and so might be inclined to over-rate their own quality as matriculants. While some allowance should be made for such a bias it does appear to be well established by observation on the part of those, like employers and university teachers, who deal with newly matriculated recruits, year after year, that there has been a deterioration in the quality of matriculants over, say, the last twenty-five years.

There has been a large increase in the number of matriculants, but this rate of increase has not been much greater than that of the rate of increase in the human population. Given South Africa's political and social composition, most of the managerial class, executive and principals, have to be drawn from the relatively small group of European matriculants. The various political parties appear to envisage that more Non-Europeans, under conditions of Apartheid or of Integration, will matriculate in the future and so in various ways qualify for managerial tasks. Any large development on these lines appears still to belong to the remote, rather than the immediate, future and, hence, any decline in the quality of the matriculants must cause concern as weakening the community's ability to hold its own in a highly competitive and dangerous world.

There seems to be wide agreement among the qualified observers that the deterioration may be described as falling under four headings of deficiency, and in each case the deficiency is greater than before.

Dr. W. J. Busschau is a prominent figure in the business and mining world of Johannesburg.

(1) *Matriculants are not very literate.* Their inability to use words effectively hampers their performance as candidates for managerial posts, since efficient management requires literacy skill in the planning and execution of its tasks. In almost all 'top management' posts in business or professions a high degree of verbal skill is required, and many in such posts find themselves struggling in unhappy fashion with the neeessity of expressing their ideas in speech or writing.

(2) *Matriculations are not very 'numerate'.* The words 'numerate' and 'numeracy' have recently been invented in a press discussion in England to have similar meanings in relation to 'numbers' (mathematics) as 'literate' and 'literacy' have in relation to 'words' (language). In a world applying science to an ever increasing degree in its production and daily living, the importance of increasing numeracy is obvious, and the continuous and growing complaints about 'unnumerate' matriculants is all the more regrettable.

(3) *Matriculants lack ambition.* This decrease in ambition is probably a consequence of conditions of over-full employment in a period of inflation — in what the Conservatives described as 'You never had it so good', and

(4) *Matriculants lack pride in performance.* The writer has heard it said that this deficiency in South Africans is a legacy from the pioneers, Voortrekkers or Settlers. The pioneers often were short of the right tools and perforce had to improvise so as to adapt available resources to their needs saying 'This will have to do' ('Dis goed genoeg'). This might once have been a good excuse: it is so no longer.

If the deficiencies are admitted, what is the cure? Observers here again appear to be in general agreement that the remuneration of teachers is too low to attract as good teachers as in the past, that many now in the profession remain in it because of inertia or loyalty and not because of reward, and that with the poorer quality of the new entrants into the teaching profession, the

deterioration in the quality of their products, the matriculants, will become greater.

Some believe that education should be 'de-socialised', but the realistic assumption is that the electorate will, at least in the immediate future, continue to insist on State education. Teachers unfortunately as a class do not constitute a powerful political lobby — witness Mr. Macmillan's recent insistence that teachers' wage claims in the United Kingdom have now to be set aside. The responsibility for improving their lot falls on the electorate and those they elect to governing positions. The facts indicate that so far the responsibility has not been properly borne, but as the neglect is now assuming serious consequences, reform should not be delayed. South Africans like talking of maintaining "Western Civilisation" but fail to realise that this means that the performance of matriculants must be fine, and hence the quality of those who matriculate, and those who teach them, must be kept high. The expenditure involved in such improvement should, therefore, be given the highest priority. Any community that treats teachers as ours does, and runs into trouble, cannot claim it is undeserved.

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