



## EDUCATION

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# SA's independent schools jump through hoops for Umalusi

## **Must meet requirements few public schools are held to.**

CAPE TOWN - South Africa's 2 500-odd independent schools are already reeling under the mountains of paperwork that they are expected to submit to Umalusi, the government body delegated with accreditation of independent education organisations. But this mountain has just grown bigger, as has the price tag for the privilege of being accredited.

Umalusi was created in 2001 to develop a framework for the accreditation of independent schools and then to accredit these schools, private adult learning centres and private further education and training colleges. In October last year this policy was finally completed and approved by government. In April it was presented to the independent schools by Umalusi.

The policy was greeted with dismay by independent schools across the board – from those that charge fees of R7,200/year to those that charge R70,000/year.

Previously Umalusi charged R7 000 to R9 000 for accreditation. Accreditation ensures that independent schools comply with certain minimum standards. Now Umalusi will also perform quality assurance assessments which involve sending professionals to schools to assess and evaluate the standard of teaching at the school.

As a result costs have rocketed. For a school with 600 pupils between grades one and 12, the cost of the combined process will be around R75 000. "The provisional accreditation process was designed to evaluate only one aspect of what is necessary for the provision of quality education, namely institutional capacity," says Umalusi CEO, Dr Mafu Rakometsi.

"As a result the process only required one or two evaluators to conduct a site verification visit. The process was not designed to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning - this requires the involvement of subject specialists."

Aside from the huge costs now involved, many schools and the associations that represent them, have little faith in the process itself.

“The policies that we have to develop and the admin involved are unnecessarily tedious – I’m talking about boxes of files. I have to employ someone just to handle the Umalusi stuff,” says Helenne Ulster, principal of United Church School in Yeoville. “I wouldn’t mind if all of this improved our standards, but it doesn’t.”

United Church School is 23 years old and has a 100% matric pass rate. “Keeping our school free of the drugs and booze that surround us is hard enough. Umalusi’s unnecessary admin adds to our challenges,” Ulster says.

That schools require policies is a given. But Umalusi’s requirements appear extreme. “We need a quality management system. This is the policy that guides the development and implementation of internal policies,” she says. “Within this we need a policy that oversees monitoring of these policies. They are asking for policies on policies, it’s crazy.”

Independent school associations were horrified at the jump in fees and the complexity of the process. Schools are expected to apply for accreditation every seven years, submit to a performance evaluation twice in that time and update Umalusi annually on policy development and evaluation.

This is after they have registered with provincial departments of education. “This requires that all your teachers are registered, that you have facilities that meet a certain standard, that you have audited financials,” says Jane Hofmeyr, head of ISASA, the Independent Schools Association of SA.

In addition, if a school’s fees are low enough to qualify for a government subsidy, another set of requirements must be fulfilled: “The objective is government is ensuring that its money is not misspent. The result is a mountain of red tape. Independent schools are the most accountable schools in SA. It is a huge barrier for entry.”

In order to engage more effectively, the associations formed an umbrella association, National Alliance of Independent Schools Associations (Naisa), to lobby for changes to the policy framework. “Quality assurance in schools is a completely different animal to accreditation. It requires careful monitoring and management,” says Naisa chairman, Ebrahim Ansur.

The new, increased fee is payable in advance and is due in October. It will put a dent in the budget of all but the wealthiest schools.

“We want to do the Umalusi process,” says Liz van Tonder, principal at Orban School in Westdene, Johannesburg. “It provides a benchmark and sets a standard that all schools must adhere to. It is also important from a marketing perspective. School is a cut throat business these days and if you are not accredited you are not good enough in parent’s minds.”

But, she adds, “to find R20 000 by October is a lot of money for a little school like ours. We have to bake pancakes to fund the whiteboard we want, and now we need to find budget for Umalusi.”

“You might as well shut us down,” says Elaine Kokman, the principal of H2 Primary in Umtata. “We charge R2060/term but still our parents don’t pay. We get a government subsidy but the Eastern Cape department of Education doesn’t pay all of it. We can’t put our fees up. Government does not see us as valuable partners who are helping to provide our children with a quality education. Everytime you need something from Umalusi you have to pay. This is all about making money. It is not right.”

Following discussions between Naisa and Umalusi, concessions regarding the fees were made. “These will range from 5% to 20%, depending on the income and socio-economic factors related to the school,” says Rakometsi.

Also of concern to many professionals in the independent school system is Umalusi’s capacity to do the job. “It is already well behind on the accreditation process,” says Hofmeyr. “About 450 schools are fully accredited. Others are partially accredited. No one is even sure how many independent schools exist.”

What is frustrating some is that Umalusi has disregarded capacity that already exists in the system. In the absence of quality assurance over the past ten years, ISASA stepped into the gap. “Independent schools were persuaded that they should use the Independent Quality Assurance Agency for quality assurance because this would be accepted by Umalusi,” says Vernon Wood, the senior deputy head at Bishops College.

“The IQAA process costs about R4 500. Now Umalusi has said that only they can do quality assurance, but they will charge R70 000. We have a bigger budget than most, but there is no point in paying to be certified twice and we have no choice but to use Umalusi.”

This process might be palatable if it helped weed out the fly by night schools, but it is not. “It is designed to accredit schools that wish to operate legally,” says Rakometsi. “The matter relating to fly by night schools is being addressed in collaboration with provincial departments of education.”

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