

CHOOSING WHAT COMES NEXT

A parent guide to post-matric and tertiary pathways

A useful starting point

The next decision does not need to determine a whole life. It needs to give this young person a credible place to begin, learn and make a more informed decision from there.

For many families, matric results and acceptance letters create the sense that there is one narrow route forward: a well-known university, a particular degree and a career choice that has to hold for decades. That route may be right. It is not the only recognised, worthwhile or appropriate one.

The better question is not simply, “Where can they get in?” It is, “Where are they likely to cope, engage, complete and progress?”

1. Start with the student, not the institution

A course can be accredited, affordable and impressive on paper and still be a poor fit. Before comparing names and prospectuses, get clear about the young person who will actually have to live inside the choice.

- ☐ What holds their attention: subjects, people, problems, ideas, tools, making or practical work?
- ☐ How do they learn best: through reading, discussion, demonstration, making, doing or a combination?
- ☐ How much structure do they need: a visible timetable, regular feedback, smaller classes, easy access to lecturers or external accountability?
- ☐ What support has helped before: accommodations, academic coaching, counselling, assistive technology, transport, routine or a quieter environment?
- ☐ What tends to derail them: large unstructured settings, online isolation, executive-function demands, sensory overload, anxiety or unclear expectations?
- ☐ What matters now: a qualification, employable skills, confidence, work exposure, a bridge into further study or time to explore?

Fit is part of the outcome

Prestige, affordability and programme content matter. So do attendance, access to help, belonging and whether the student can realistically complete the course.

2. Understand the main routes

These pathways have different purposes and outcomes. Compare the exact qualification and what it enables, rather than relying on a broad label.

Route	What it may offer	What to test before deciding
Bachelor's degree	A broad or professionally focused academic qualification.	Entry requirements, workload, professional recognition, practical components and first-year support.
Diploma	An applied qualification that often combines theory with vocational or practical learning.	Work-integrated learning, progression into further study and employer recognition.
Higher Certificate	A recognised undergraduate qualification, usually at NQF Level 5. It	Exact progression route, required marks, credit transfer and whether

Use this guide as a starting point, then confirm current requirements directly with the institution or authority.

	may build confidence, support entry-level work or lead into related further study.	progression is guaranteed or subject to selection and space.
Occupational, technical or artisan route	Learning tied more directly to an occupation, practical competence, workplace experience or a trade test.	Registered outcome, provider approval, workplace component, external assessment and what follows.
Purposeful gap period	A planned period for work exposure, job shadowing, volunteering, short accredited learning, applications or career exploration.	A written plan, time frame, budget, support and a clear outcome for the end of the period.

Still at school?

If the learner has completed Grade 9 and the conventional matric route is no longer working, see the related Hub article on vocational alternatives after Grade 9. That is a different decision and needs its own careful investigation.

3. Higher Certificates: what families often miss

A Higher Certificate is not another matric and it is not a pretend degree. It is a recognised tertiary qualification. Completing one does not change the student's original matric result or automatically create bachelor's admission. It gives them a new qualification and academic record, which an institution may consider for entry into a related programme.

- ☐ Which exact diploma or degree may follow this programme?
- ☐ What overall average and module marks are required?
- ☐ Is progression assured once those marks are met, or still subject to selection and space?
- ☐ Will completed modules carry credit into the next qualification?
- ☐ Does the route apply only within this institution?
- ☐ What can the qualification offer if the student does not continue further?

Get it in writing

"Your child can do a degree afterwards" is not enough. Ask which degree, at which institution, under what conditions and whether any credits will carry over.

4. Common myths

Myth	Reality
A Higher Certificate is another matric.	It is a recognised tertiary qualification with its own NQF level and academic record.
Private higher education is automatically lower quality.	Quality depends on the exact institution, qualification, delivery and support.
University is always the best option.	The best option is the one the student can enter, manage, complete and use.
Choosing one route closes every other door.	Many routes allow later progression, but the exact rules must be checked before enrolling.
Online study is easier.	It can offer flexibility, but it often demands strong self-management, routine and help-seeking.

5. Check what you are actually buying

The exact qualification: Ask for the full registered title, NQF level, credit value and SAQA identification number. Establish whether it is a formal qualification, part-qualification, skills programme or provider certificate.

The institution and delivery site: For private higher education, check the current DHET register. For occupational programmes, confirm the qualification and provider approval through the relevant QCTO information. Check the actual campus or delivery site too.

The destination: Ask what work, further study, professional registration, apprenticeship or trade-test route the qualification can lead to.

Professional recognition: Some fields require recognition or registration beyond the academic qualification. Confirm this before enrolling.

Workplace learning: Check whether placement is included, supported or left to the family to arrange, and whether it is required for completion.

6. Compare the lived experience

Students experience lecturers, systems, deadlines, feedback, travel, class size and whether anybody notices when they begin to fall behind. Ask about:

- Teaching: live, recorded or self-paced; class size; access to lecturers.
- Assessment: exams, assignments and practical work; feedback and reassessment rules.
- Structure: timetables, attendance monitoring and follow-up on missed work.
- Support: tutoring, academic literacy, counselling, accessibility and executive-function support.
- Accommodations: how they are applied for, approved and implemented.
- Belonging: whether the student can visit, attend an information session or speak to a current student.

7. Warning signs

- The provider will not supply the exact qualification title, registration details or progression rules in writing.
- Accreditation language is used broadly without identifying the status of the specific programme.
- Workplace placement is advertised, but the family must arrange it without meaningful support.
- The route into further study is described only as “possible” or “many opportunities”.
- Support appears in marketing material, but nobody can explain how a struggling student is identified and helped.
- Pressure is placed on the family to pay immediately before questions have been answered.

8. Do the full calculation

Compare the cost of completing the route, not tuition alone. Include registration, books, software, devices, data, transport, accommodation, meals, practical materials, external assessments, repeat modules and the cost of taking longer than planned.

9. Before paying anything

- ☐ I have checked the institution and the exact qualification.
- ☐ I understand the NQF level, credits and likely outcome.
- ☐ I have progression or employment claims in writing.
- ☐ I have calculated the full likely cost, including extras and repeats.
- ☐ We understand the learning structure, support and accommodations available.
- ☐ The student has visited, attended an information session or spoken to someone on the programme.
- ☐ This choice fits this student, not only the reputation of the institution.

10. A simple way to decide

1. Name the student’s strengths, needs, interests and non-negotiables.
2. Choose two or three route types to investigate.

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3. Shortlist exact qualifications, not only institutions.
4. Verify the qualification, provider and delivery site.
5. Get written answers about progression, support, accommodations, workplace learning and costs.
6. Visit or attend an information session.
7. Compare every option using the same questions.

11. Comparison worksheet

Use the same questions for every option. Add evidence or notes rather than relying on memory.

Question	Option A	Option B	Option C	Evidence / notes
Exact qualification and NQF level				
Institution and delivery site				
Entry requirements				
Progression or employment outcome				
Learning structure and support				
Accommodations				
Workplace or practical component				
Full likely cost				
Why it may fit this student				

12. Questions for an open day or adviser

- ☐ What does a typical week look like for a first-year student?
- ☐ How many hours of independent work are expected?
- ☐ Who follows up after missed classes or submissions?
- ☐ How are accommodations implemented?
- ☐ Can we speak to a current student?
- ☐ What proportion of students complete the qualification?
- ☐ What are the most common reasons students leave or take longer?
- ☐ Which qualifications or jobs did recent graduates move into?
- ☐ What costs are excluded from the advertised tuition?
- ☐ Can progression, credit-transfer and placement information be supplied in writing?

The decision is not the whole future

The goal is not to choose the most impressive pathway. It is to choose a credible next step that gives this young person the best chance of learning, growing and believing in themselves as a learner.

Reliable starting points

Information and links in this guide were checked against official DHET, SAQA and QCTO sources in August 2026. Requirements, registration and programme approvals change, so check them again before an application or payment.

DHET registers: <https://www.dhet.gov.za/SitePages/DocRegisters.aspx>

SAQA qualifications: <https://allqs.saqa.org.za/>

QCTO occupational routes: <https://www.qcto.org.za/>

Khetha career guidance: <https://www.careerhelp.org.za/>