- **Looking closely at Learner Performance in South Africa's National Senior Certificate**

- **Home Language Examinations: 2014 - 2024**

- 41st Annual Conference of the AEAA,

- August 2025, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Outline

- Introduction
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- Purpose and rationale
- Research methodology
- Results and discussion
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Introduction

- The last study on the comparability of the National Senior Certificate (NSC) Home Language (HL) examinations was done in 2012. This study is now seriously dated. Against this backdrop,

  - this paper analyses the performance of Grade 12 learners in the NSC HL examination papers covering the period 2014-2024, in an attempt to shed some light on the issue of equivalents of the standards of HL examinations

- Since 2008, languages within the South African schooling system are taught and assessed at three different levels: Home Language (HL), First Additional Language (FAL)and Second Additional Language (SAL)

- Grade 12 learner performance in the HL exams forms part of the key criteria used to determine which learners are awarded the NSC: a learner must pass 7 subjects of which 2 are languages - one at HL level and another at FAL level to achieve the NSC

- Having been accorded official status, "all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably." (RSA Constitution, 1996)

- In fulfillment of the constitutional obligation, various reforms and measures have been put in place by state institutions, including education authorities over time

Contextualisation

- Prior to 1997, each of South Africa's 18 education authorities had separate language curricula or syllabus for teaching and assessment purposes. Since 1997, there have been numerous revisions to the language curriculum and assessment practices with the intension of achieving common standards

    - In 1997, a common curriculum, written in English and translated or 'versioned' into the other 10 official languages, was introduced for all official languages to ensure that all languages were taught and examined to the same degree of rigor (Murray, 2012)

    - To strengthen the curriculum and further provide a common set of standards of teaching and assessment of languages, the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) was introduced in 2001

    - Since the introduction of the NSC in 2008, all language exams, including those for HL, FAL and SAL, are set nationally to ensure that every learner across South Africa's 9 provinces is assessed against a common yardstick (DBE, 2012)

    - In 2014, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) for HLs was introduced in Grade 12 to ensure that all HL exams are equivalent in terms of the construct taught and assessed

- Against this backdrop, HLs are based on common set of curriculum and assessment standards

- Umalusi certifies as successful those learners who write and achieve a particular level of performance in the NSC HL examinations

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Conceptual framing (a)

- In order to lead a clear argument, the key concepts should first be defined. This paper has adopted the definition offered by the Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary according to which "fairness " is

    – "the quality of treating people equally or in a way that is right or reasonable"

- Kane (2010), takes the definition further by arguing that assessment practices are considered as fair if they do not unduly privilege a particular group of test-takers (examinees in our case)

- In simple terms, fairness is the "absence of bias, equitable treatment of all test-takers in the testing process, and equity in opportunity to learn the material in an achievement test" (Educational Testing Service, 2014, p. 57).

- "Differences in the educational experiences of students are often discussed but seldom linked with perceptions of the fairness of exams" (Shaw 2021:10)

- Based on the foregoing, developing exams that are as fair as possible contributes to the societal goal of equal opportunities for all

Conceptual framing (b)

- Exam performance forms the basis of important decisions. Writing in the context of language tests, Bachman (2004) argues that

  - "scores from language tests are used to make inferences about individuals' language ability and to inform decision we make about those individuals"

  - "An equally critical issue is the comparability of decisions and consequences, because these are what ultimately affect the lives of test takers and other stakeholders" (Bachman, 2011)

- In norm referencing contexts, where marks are used to make relative decisions, interpretations are made with reference to relative standing of individual candidates within a particular group (Bachman, 2004)

- In other words, decisions are made relative to the performance of the norm group, thereby making the norm group the standard. Based on that, Bachman (2004: 156) cautions that

  - "the characteristics of the testing method and administration procedure will have a *systemic* effect on test scores, since they may affect different groups of individuals differently" (Bachman, 2004: 156)

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Purpose and rationale

- Umalusi (2006 and 2012) assert that there is a need to ensure comparability of examination standards from one year to the other so that learners are not unduly advantaged or disadvantaged by the exam year

- On the other hand, Du Plessis (2014) argues that understanding the standard of HL examinations linked to the NSC is a much-neglected area of research

- Thus, the purpose of this study is to better understand learner performance in the NSC examinations in 11 HLs over time.

- The rationale behind that is that with the implementation of the CAPS since 2015

  - all HLs are weighted equally towards the awarding of the NSC

  - all HLs are based on the same construct (language abilities) taught and assessed in Paper 1 (the study of grammar), Paper 2 (the study of literature) and Paper 3 (creative writing)

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Research questions

- This paper sought an answer to the following research questions:

  - How did performance standards compare in the NSC HL examinations administered to Gade 12 learners between 2014 to 2024?

  - Were the performance standards consistent throughout the 11 official HLs and, if not, in what respect did they differ within and across years?
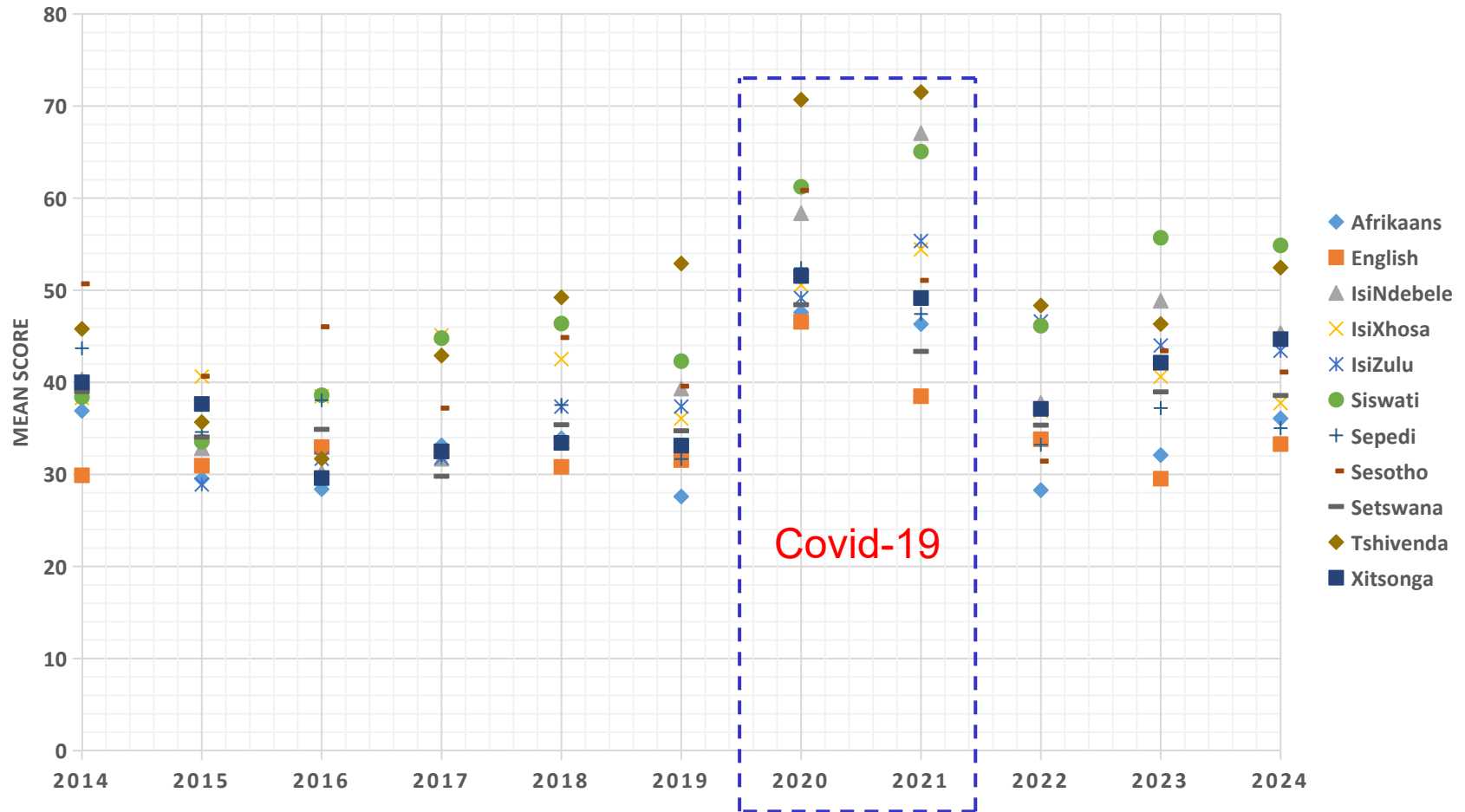
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Methodology

- Using both qualitative and quantitative methods of comparisons, the paper analyses trends in the NSC HL performance data for the period 2014 – 2024

- To gain deeper insights, the analysis is conducted per paper to look for patterns of similarities and differences in how learners performed in each of the papers over time

- The analysis is based on the following indicators considered appropriate for comparing performance in the same or similar subjects over time:

  - candidature, absenteeism rate, failure rate, pass rate, distinction rate and average (mean) scores

- The sources of data are the DBE's technical reports and Umalusi databases

- The points of differentiation and similarity are presented in tabular and graphic formats

The current design of HL exams

| Paper	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)
Paper 1	**Language (70 marks - 17,5%): 2 hours** - Comprehension (30): 700-800 words - Summary (10): 80-90 words - Language structures & conventions (30)
Paper 2	**Literature (80 marks - 20%): 2½ hours** - Poetry (30): 250-300 words - Novel - Literary essay (25): 400-450 words - Drama - Literary essay (25): 400-450 words
Paper 3	**Writing (100 marks - 25%): 2½ hours** - Essay (50): 400-450 words - Transactional texts (2 X 25 = 50): 180-200 words
Oral	50 marks -12,5%: listening & speaking tasks
SBA	100 marks - 25%: 7 tasks, 1 test, 2 exams
Total	**400**

Performance in Paper 1, 2014-2024
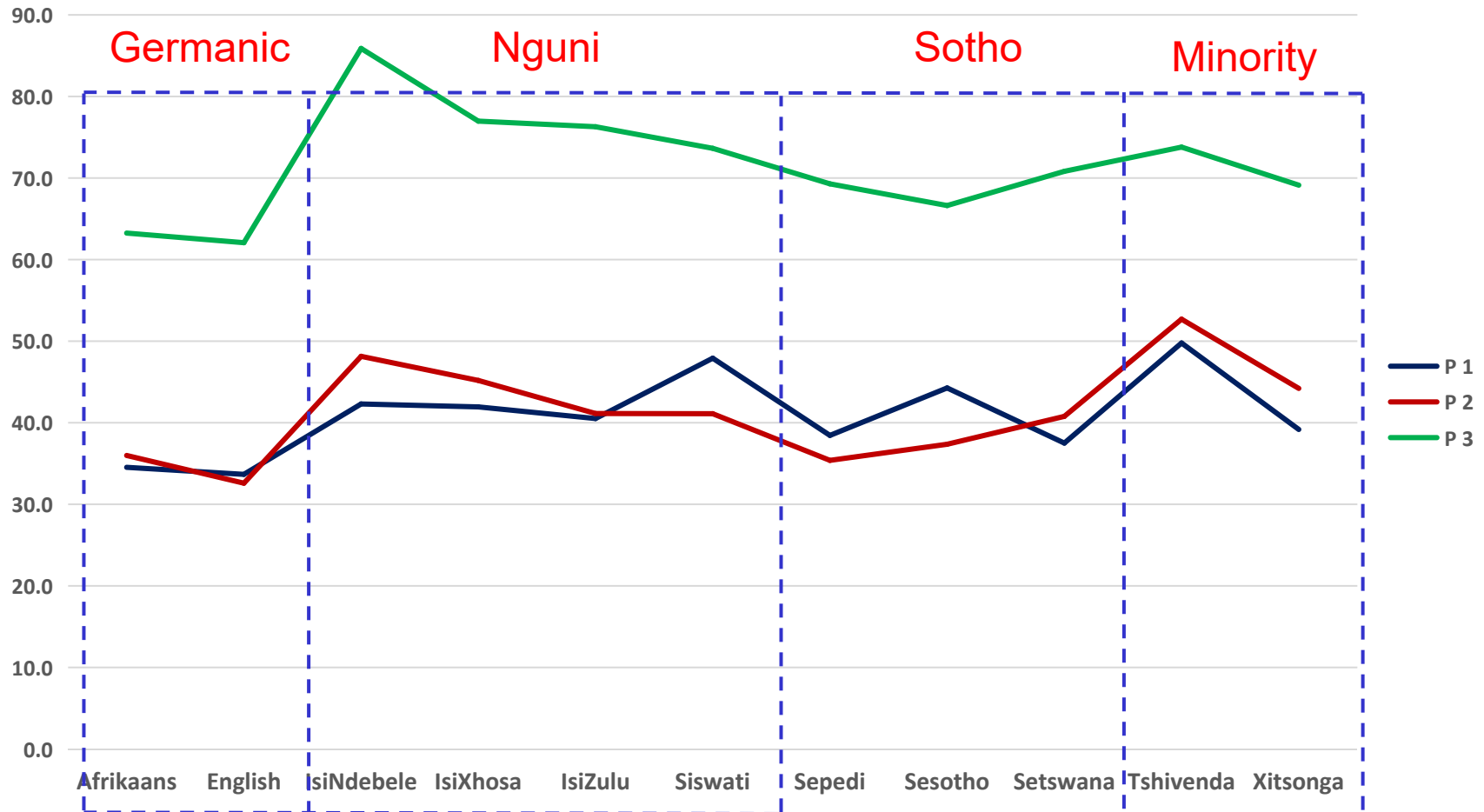
Performance in Paper 2, 2014-2024
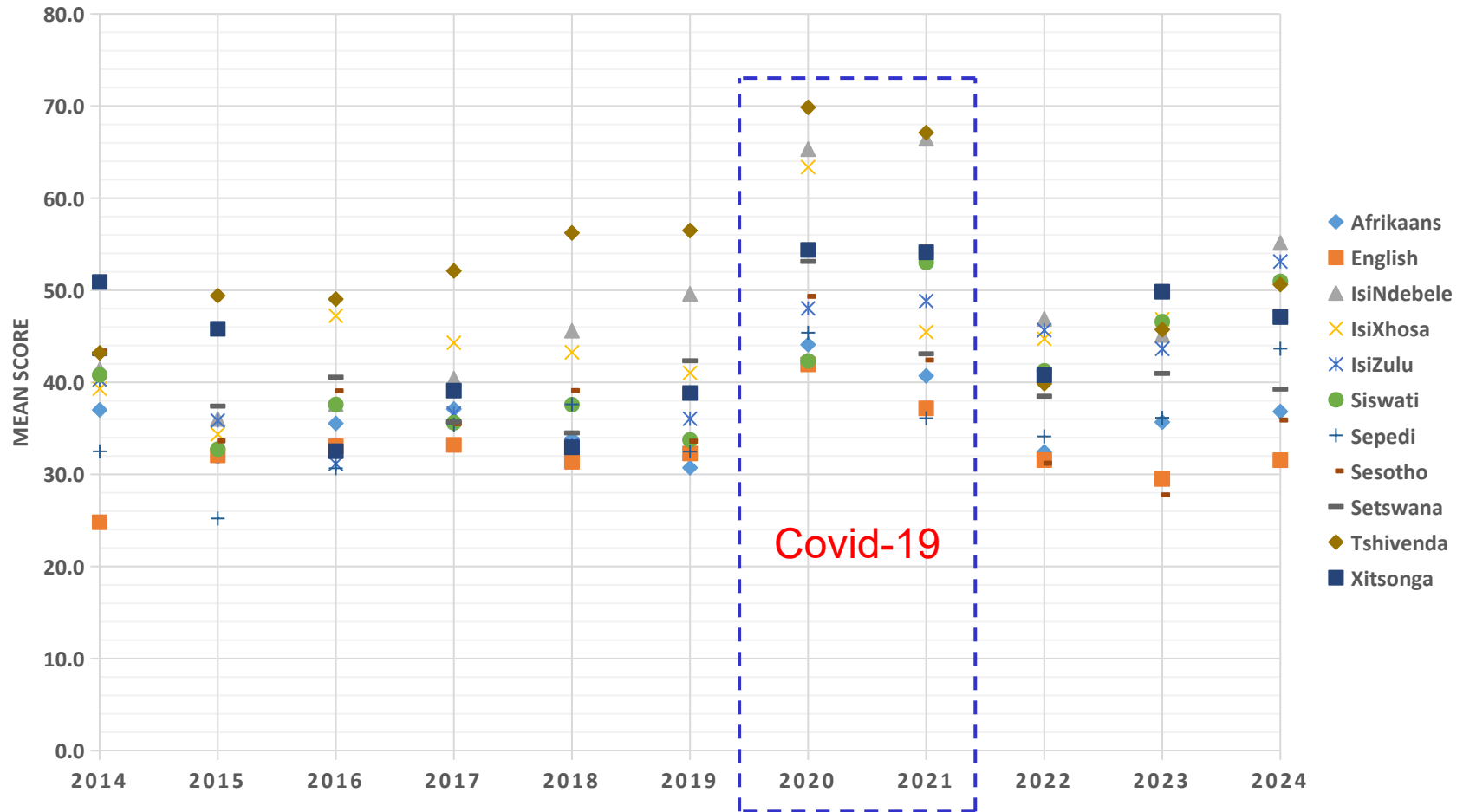
Performance in Paper 3, 2014-2024
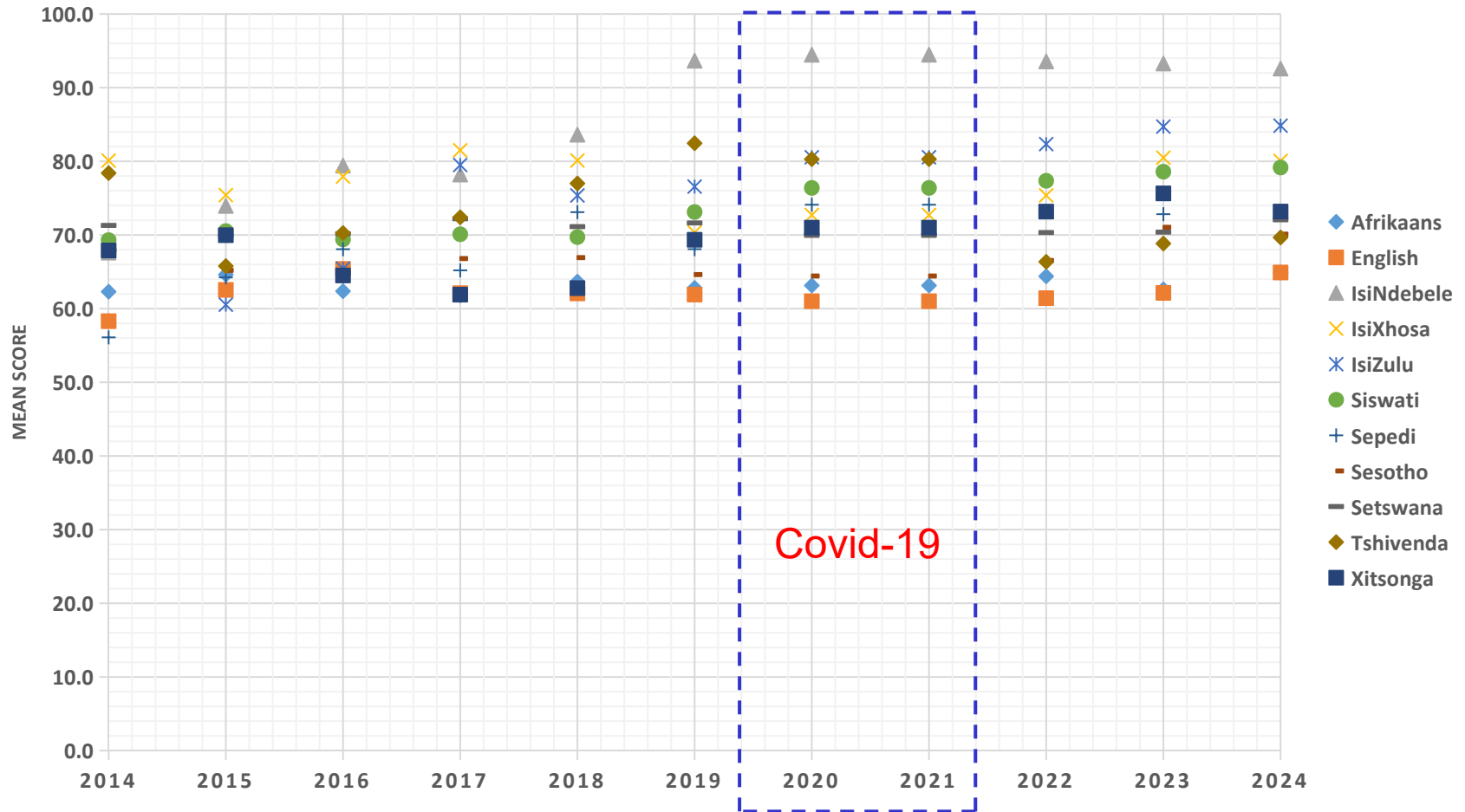
The overall picture (P1-P3), 2014-2024
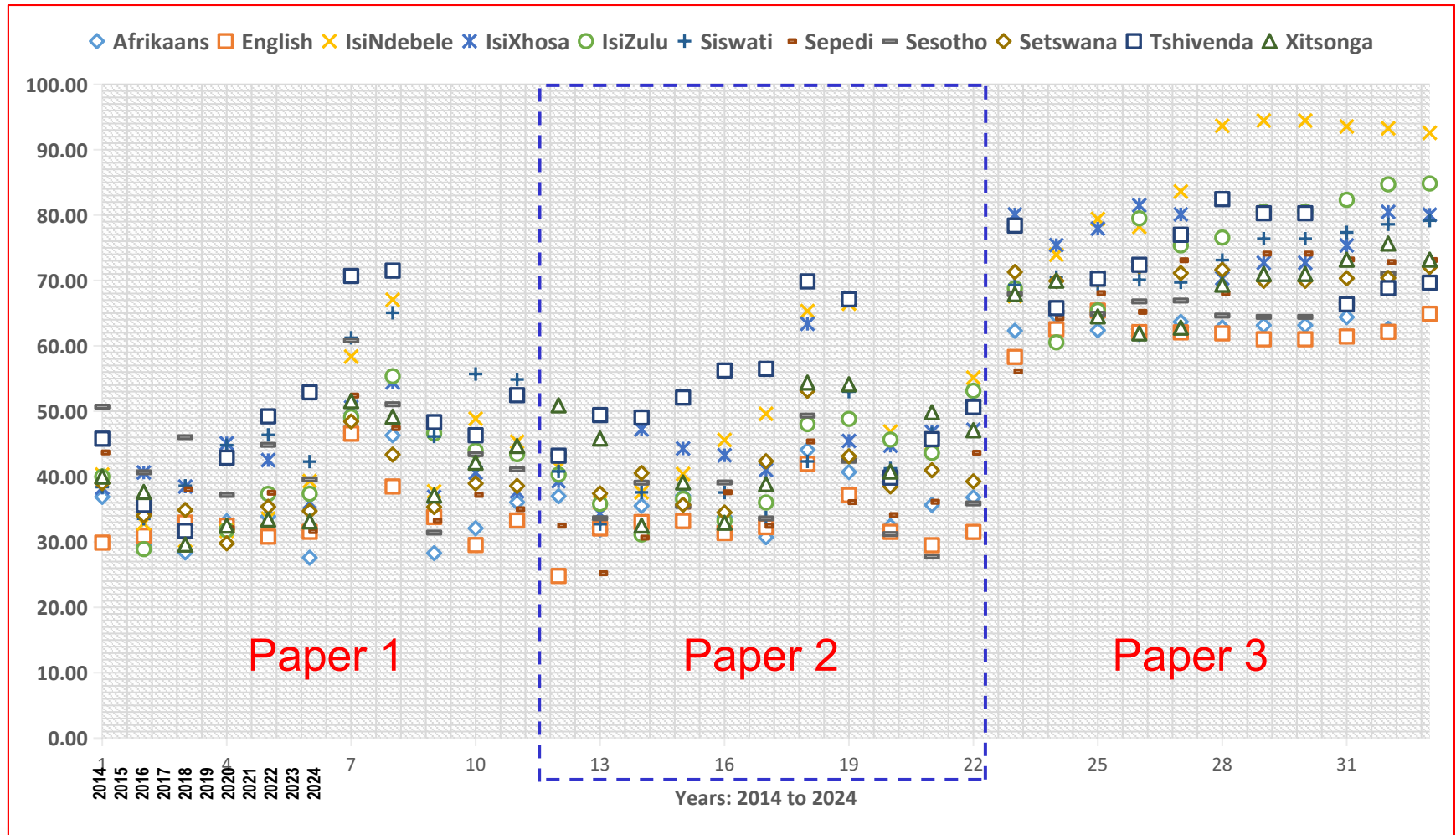
Average performance by paper, 2014-2024

Stepping up over time

	2001-2007 (SC-PE_NN&S)	2008-2013 (NSC-RNCS)	2014-2020 (NSC-CAPS)	2021-2024 (NSC-CAPS)
Top 3	- Xitsonga (62) - Tshivenda (59.8) - Sepedi (55.6)	- Tshivenda (66.8) - Xitsonga (66.4) - IsiNdebele (65.2)	- Tshivenda (69.5) - IsiNdebele (67.3) - IsiXhosa (65.5)	- Tshivenda (65.4) - Xitsonga (64.7) - Sesotho (61.0)
Middle 5	- IsiZulu (54.9) - Afrikaans (52.8) - Setswana (52.4) - IsiNdebele (52.2) - English (51.9)	- Siswati (62.9) - IsiZulu (62.3) - IsiXhosa (61.7) - Sepedi (60.5) - Setswana (58.9)	- Siswati (61.3) - Sesotho (59.8) - Setswana (59.7) - IsiZulu (59.6) - Xitsonga (59)	- IsiZulu (59.5) - Setswana (58.7) - Sepedi (58.3) - IsiNdebele (58.2) - IsiXhosa (57.8)
Bottom 3	- Sesotho (51.7) - Siswati (50) - IsiXhosa (49.7)	- Sesotho (58.9) - English (54.4) - Afrikaans (51.1)	- Sepedi (57.8) - Afrikaans (54.7) - English (53.5)	- Afrikaans (56.6) - English (55.1) - Siswati (54.2)
Ave.	53.9	60.9	60.7	59.0
GAP	12.3	15.7	16	11.2

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Major trends in HL performance

- Several observations arise from the analysis of the foregoing data:

  - First, P1 and P2 displayed a similar statistical behaviour across the years; except during the covid years (Slides, 16-17 & 20)

  - Third, P3, which contributes 25% towards the final mark, has a weak discrimination power in that no HL records a mark below 60%, on average. It has sustained an upward trajectory since 2015 (Slide 20)

  - Fourth, the minority languages (isiNdebele, Siswati, Tshivenda) have largely been at the top of the heap across the 3 exam papers, especially in the most recent past (Slides 19 & 21)

  - Finally, except for Afrikaans and English (Germanic languages), generally no learner fails a HL exam, a finding which confirms the 2012 Umalusi study

Pulling it together

- The analysis of Grade 12 HL performance data for the period 2014-2024 reveals that HLs perform differently by way of forming clusters.

- The 'normative mean' shows that

  - the Nguni languages (isiXhosa, isiZulu and Siswati) are clustered together; the Sotho language (Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana) formed their own cluster; and the same is true for the Germanic languages (Afrikaans and English) HLs form clusters.

  - The exceptions are isiNdebele, Tshivenda and Xitsonga.

- While the average performance for P1 is around 38%, some minority languages are at 40% and above.

- Concerning P2, the HLs perform at 40%, but some HLs (isiNdebele, isiXhosa, Tshivenda and Xitsonga) perform beyond that level.

- The data makes it apparent that P3 is the single biggest cause for the die variation in performance across the African HLs because no HL performs below 60%, on average. Interestingly, isiNdebele, Siswati and Tshivenda performed in an outlying manner.

- Considering the size and geographical distribution of HLs such as isiNdebele, Siswati, Tshivenda, it is unsurprising that these HLs have always been ahead of the curve.

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Conclusion

- Since all the HL exams were given the stamp of approval by Umalusi moderators throughout the period, thereby certifying that the exams complied with the CAPS and other relevant policies in terms of their design and the construct assessed, the marks achieved must be trusted.

- Writing in the context of the past paper tradition, *The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills*, (1997: 364) argues:

  - "As teachers become more adept at this process, they can even teach students to answer correctly test items intended to measure students' ability to apply, or synthesise, even thought the students have not developed application, analysis, or synthesis skills"

- The above finds support in the work of Crewe (2013: 25) who writes:

  - "In an ideal education system if teachers teach what the standards say they should teach, and assessments are valid because they assess the same standards, students would have been taught what is in their assessments and therefore students are prepared for their assessment."

The end.

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