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FACT SHEET

Adult Illiteracy in South Africa

Author: Mamphokhu Khuluvhe



higher education
& training

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Department of Higher Education and Training

123 Francis Baard Street
Pretoria
South Africa

Private Bag X174
Pretoria
0001

Tel.: 0800 87 22 22

www.dhet.gov.za

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Enquiries:

Tel.: 012 312 5465

Fax: 086 457 0289

Email: khuluvhe.m@dhet.gov.za

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1. BACKGROUND

The United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) asserts that Literacy is an integral part of the right to education and the foundation of lifelong learning as well as a driver for sustainable development. It also postulates that literacy empowers individuals, improves livelihoods, enables greater participation in society and the labour market, benefits child and family health and nutrition, and reduces poverty¹. Those with inadequate levels of literacy cannot be fully involved in social and political discourse, but most importantly, cannot possibly make informed decisions that help shape policies in their communities.

UNESCO also observes that beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world². Globally at least 773 million youth and adults still cannot read and write and 250 million children are failing to acquire basic literacy skills. This results in an exclusion of low-literate and low-skilled youth and adults from full participation in their communities and societies³.

The United Nations takes the following approaches to promote literacy worldwide:

- Building strong foundations through early childhood care and education;
- Providing quality basic education for all children;
- Scaling-up functional literacy levels for youth and adults who lack basic literacy skills; and
- Developing literate environments.

The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training⁴ (PSET) points out that the PSET system is expected to cater for adults who never attended school or who did not complete schooling. South Africa also has international obligations to ensure the provision of education for all. Among these obligations are the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 that calls for an inclusive and quality equitable education for all, and to ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy. It is therefore imperative for the Department to understand the extent to which adults do not have the levels of education that could make them functionally literate, and to provide programmes that could deal with this challenge.

¹ <https://uil.unesco.org/literacy/global-alliance>

² <https://en.unesco.org/themes/literacy>

³ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/literacy>

⁴ DHET. (2013). White Paper for Post-School Education and Training. Department of Higher Education and Training, Pretoria.

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this Fact Sheet is to show the extent to which there is potential demand for programmes that address the challenge of adult illiteracy in South Africa. This Fact Sheet responds to the following questions:

- a) What is the adult illiteracy rate in South Africa, and what are its patterns of distribution?
- b) What are the implications of the findings on adult illiteracy for the PSET system?

3. TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

3.1 Literacy

Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts⁵. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society. It measures adults' proficiency in key information-processing skills such as literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments⁶.

3.2 Functional literacy

A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development⁷.

3.3 Functional Illiteracy

A person is functionally illiterate who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development⁸. In South Africa, the level of educational attainment is used as a proxy to measure literacy levels within the country, and Grade 7 not completed is used by both the Department of Basic Education⁹ and Statistics South Africa¹⁰ in terms of their General Housing Survey as a proxy measure for functional illiteracy. This Fact Sheet therefore uses Grade 7 not completed as a proxy measure for functional illiteracy.

⁵ <http://www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/adultliteracy.htm>

⁶ http://gaml.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/4.6.1_07_4.6-defining-literacy.pdf

⁷ <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=1536>

⁸ <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=1279>

⁹ Department of Basic Education. (2019). General Household Survey (GHS) 2018 report: Focus on schooling. Department of Basic Education, Pretoria.

¹⁰ Statistics South Africa. (2020). General Household Survey 2019.

3.4 Adult Illiteracy Rate

Adult illiteracy rate is calculated by dividing the number of persons of a given age range who are not literate, by the corresponding age group population and multiply the result by 100.

3.5 Adult

Adult refers to persons aged 20 years and older in the South African population.

4. FACTS AND FIGURES

In 2019, the South African adult illiteracy rate was 12%, reflecting a significant improvement of 7.1 percentage points over the past decade. Despite this improvement, it is striking that 4.4 million adults in South Africa are still illiterate. South Africa's illiteracy rate is not far ahead of the global average of 14%¹¹, and is therefore a matter of concern.

Although illiteracy levels are higher for females (12.5%) than males (11.6%), the gender gap in shares of illiteracy as well as illiteracy rates have narrowed markedly.

Table 1: Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and older who have not completed grade 7 and above by gender, 2009 and 2019

Gender	2009			2019		
	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate
Male	2 480 923	43.2%	17.4%	2 046 127	46.3%	11.6%
Female	3 265 779	56.8%	20.9%	2 375 457	53.7%	12.5%
Total	5 746 702	100.0%	19.2%	4 421 584	100.0%	12.1%

Source: General Household Survey (GHS). Statistics South Africa

Table 2 shows that in 2019 the illiteracy rate remained highest among Black Africans compared to other race groupings. Of note though, is that the illiteracy rate among Black Africans had declined significantly over the past 10 years, while that among Whites had actually increased, the latter probably due to age demographics.

Table 2: Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who have not completed grade 7 and above by population group, 2009 and 2019

Population Group	2009			2019		
	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate
Black African	5 289 177	92.0%	23.4%	4 037 328	91.3%	14.0%
Coloured	399 305	6.9%	14.3%	336 637	7.6%	10.3%
Indian	46 704	0.8%	5.3%	35 502	0.8%	3.3%
White	11 516	0.2%	0.3%	12 117	0.3%	0.3%
Total	5 746 702	100.0%	19.2%	4 421 585	100.0%	12.1%

Source: General Household Survey (GHS). Statistics South Africa

¹¹ Adapted from UNESCO Institute of Statistics (Wikipedia)

Table 3 shows that in 2019, the highest illiteracy rates are observed in Eastern Cape (18.2%) followed closely by North-West (17.8%) and Limpopo (17.6%). Although KwaZulu-Natal does not have the highest illiteracy rate in South Africa, it is home to the largest number of persons who are illiterate in South Africa (980 000). Eastern Cape (680 000) and Limpopo (582 000) follow on KwaZulu-Natal in respect of the numbers of people who are not literate. Given Gauteng’s status as the “richest” province in South Africa, it is surprising that its illiteracy rate is above the national average, and that it has over half a million people who are not literate.

Table 3: Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who have not completed grade 7 and above by province, 2009 and 2019

Province	2009			2019		
	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate
Western Cape	420 468	7.3%	11.7%	339 714	7.7%	7.4%
Eastern Cape	933 882	16.3%	26.7%	679 400	15.4%	18.2%
Northern Cape	184 852	3.2%	28.1%	123 974	2.8%	16.0%
Free State	346 782	6.0%	21.0%	271 106	6.1%	14.9%
KwaZulu-Natal	1 262 453	22.0%	22.4%	979 592	22.2%	14.5%
North West	552 925	9.6%	27.0%	437 751	9.9%	17.8%
Gauteng	772 837	13.4%	9.8%	579 664	13.1%	5.6%
Mpumalanga	514 700	9.0%	23.7%	428 023	9.7%	15.5%
Limpopo	757 802	13.2%	27.8%	582 361	13.2%	17.6%
Total	5 746 701	100.0%	19.2%	4 421 584	100.0%	12.1%

Source: General Household Survey (GHS). Statistics South Africa

Table 4 shows that, as expected¹², older adults¹³ in South Africa are more likely to be illiterate than younger adults¹⁴. In 2019, the illiteracy rate was highest amongst 60-64 years old (31.1%) followed by 55-59 years old (25.8%), while that among young adults was generally less than 6%. Interestingly, the illiteracy rate for 15-19 year-olds (5.9%) was higher than that for 20-24 year-olds (3.5%). This observation could possibly be explained by younger people not yet having completed Grade 7 because of grade repetition at school. Nonetheless, this phenomenon does need further investigation.

The share of adults who are illiterate increased significantly from 2009 to 2019 within the following age groups: 60-64 years old (5.6 percentage points increase), 55-59 years old (3.4 percentage points increase), 35-39 years old (0.6 percentage point increase) and 30-34 years old (0.4 percentage point increase).

¹² Younger adults are likely to be more literate than older adults because over the past 25 years, access to education, especially schooling, has improved remarkably

¹³ Older adults refer to persons aged 35 to 64 years old.

¹⁴ Younger adults refer to persons aged 15 to 34 years old.

Table 4: Number and percentage of persons in the population who have not completed grade 7 and above by age group, 2009 and 2019

Age Group	2009			2019		
	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate
15-19yrs	565 165	11.2%	10.8%	273 780	8.2%	5.9%
20-24yrs	327 614	6.5%	6.1%	168 264	5.0%	3.5%
25-29yrs	328 531	6.5%	6.9%	190 108	5.7%	3.5%
30-34yrs	360 347	7.1%	9.4%	252 375	7.5%	4.6%
35-39yrs	432 154	8.5%	13.1%	305 203	9.1%	6.5%
40-44yrs	560 882	11.1%	20.1%	284 801	8.5%	7.9%
45-49yrs	647 268	12.8%	26.3%	360 403	10.8%	12.1%
50-54yrs	686 489	13.6%	33.3%	452 181	13.5%	18.5%
55-59yrs	644 852	12.7%	38.7%	540 381	16.1%	25.8%
60-64yrs	511 761	10.1%	40.9%	524 633	15.7%	31.1%
Total	5 065 064	100.0%	15.5%	3 352 128	100.0%	8.8%

Source: General Household Survey (GHS). Statistics South Africa

5. CONCLUSION

This Fact Sheet draws attention to the 4.4 million adults in South Africa who are still illiterate. Of this group, over two thirds are below the age of 60, while about a third are below the age of 50. People in these age groupings are an important component of the working age population who need to be empowered to participate fully in society.

The post-school education and training system therefore needs to continue to provide programmes that address the illiteracy challenge in order to deliver on its mandate. There is a need to expand the provisioning of Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) programmes in order to reduce illiteracy rate in South Africa. Thus, the PSET system needs to set a target for illiteracy rate and for the provisioning of ABET programmes that address illiteracy.

ABET programmes need to reflect UNESCO's broad understanding of literacy which goes beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills. ABET curricula need to interpret literacy as "a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world"¹⁵. This means that computer literacy, including the use of the internet, needs to be part and parcel of ABET programmes. This also means that ABET lecturers need to be trained to teach adults on how to use computers.

The PSET system needs to focus on providing ABET programmes in KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, North West and Gauteng, where there are the highest numbers of illiterate persons.

¹⁵ <https://en.unesco.org/themes/literacy>