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FACT SHEET

Adult Illiteracy in South Africa

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Khuluvhe, M., (2022) *Adult illiteracy in South Africa*, Department of Higher Education and Training, Pretoria.

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1. BACKGROUND

South Africa has a high level of illiteracy, which cannot be viewed independently of the apartheid policies that were in place prior to democratization in 1994, inseparable from the developed–developing context of the country. The implications of apartheid were far-reaching and served to entrench inequalities and poverty along racial and gender lines.

After the first democratic elections, the new government faced several challenges, not least being the high number of adults who were functionally illiterate. There were many unemployed people whose low levels of literacy made them virtually unemployable due to the competition for the small number of available jobs. Consequently, many people do not have the skills to contribute to economic growth and societal development. In South Africa, most of the people struggling with literacy are more likely to be poor, lack education, and miss out on opportunities to participate fully in society and the workforce. The level of literacy in a population shapes involvement in, among others, civic processes as well as health and education provisioning.

The White Paper on Post-School Education and Training (PSET) points out that the PSET system is expected to cater for adults who never attended school or who did not complete schooling¹. 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. In 2019, 4.4 million adults in South Africa were illiterate. The illiteracy rates stood at 11.6 percent for men and 12.5 percent for women in 2019². These statistics point towards the staggering disparities in educational levels in the country. 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 as a higher literacy rate is an essential requirement for any nation to bring it on par with other nations. No nation looks promising if it has a stable economic growth rate but poor literacy rates³.

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 contexts⁴. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their

¹ DHET. (2013). White Paper for Post-School Education and Training. Department of Higher Education and Training, Pretoria.

² Khuluvhe, M., (2021) Adult illiteracy in South Africa, Department of Higher Education and Training, Pretoria.

³ Chaurasia, P., Priya, P. and, Agrawal, N, (2019) Illiteracy – A social Issue A brief study in the Indian population, International Journal of Engineering and Technical Research, Volume 9 (4), 2454-4698.

⁴ <http://www.oecd.org/education/innovation-education/adultliteracy.htm>

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 environments⁵.

3.2. Functional literacy

A functionally literate person is one who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and community and for enabling her/him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for her/his own and the community's development⁶.

3.3. 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. For the purposes of this Fact Sheet, the number of persons who are not literate is deemed to be those who have not completed Grade 7 of schooling, or its equivalent Adult Basic Education and Training qualification (ABET Level 3). The highest level of education attainment for an individual is used as a proxy measure for literacy/illiteracy since it is very expensive and resource intensive to assess literacy among adults on a sustainable basis. Internationally, the achievement of Grade 5 is often accepted as the benchmark for literacy, however, the Department has adopted Grade 7 as its own standard for literacy because of South Africa's poor performance in international assessments of literacy among Grade 4 learners.

3.4. Adult

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

⁵ http://gaml.uis.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/12/4.6.1_07_4.6-defining-literacy.pdf

⁶ <https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=1536>

4. FACTS AND FIGURES

In 2020, the South African adult illiteracy rate was 10%, indicating an improvement of 2.1 percentage points from 2019 and a significant reduction of 8.6 percentage points over the past decade. However, it remains concerning that a total of 3.7 million adults in South Africa are still illiterate, 26 years after democracy. Table 1 below also shows that women continue to fare worse than men. The illiteracy levels are higher for females (10.7%) than for men (9.3%), meaning that females continue to miss out on opportunities to participate fully in society and the workforce. The traditional structure of the family might be a contributor to higher illiteracy among females, as women tend to be caregivers and stay home to raise children.

Table 1: Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and older who have not completed grade 7 and above by gender, 2010, 2019 and 2020

Gender	2010			2019			2020		
	Number	% Share	Illiteracy Rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy Rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy Rate
Male	2 471 590	43.5	17.0	2 046 127	46.3	11.6	1 671 422	44.7	9.3
Female	3 208 902	56.5	20.1	2 375 457	53.7	12.5	2 069 518	55.3	10.7
Total	5 680 492	100.0	18.6	4 421 584	100.0	12.1	3 740 940	100.0	10.0

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

Table 2 below shows that illiteracy levels are more prevalent for Black Africans compared to other race groupings. It is worth noting that in 2020, White adults were reported to be fully literate.

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, 2010, 2019 and 2020

Population group	2010			2019			2020		
	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate
African/Black	5 218 752	91.9	22.5	4 037 328	91.3	14.0	3 447 592	92.2	11.7
Coloured	380 032	6.7	13.4	336 637	7.6	10.3	241 639	6.5	7.3
Indian/Asian	59 811	1.1	6.6	35 502	0.8	3.3	51 709	1.4	4.7
White	21 898	0.4	0.6	12 117	0.3	0.3	-	-	-
Total	5 680 492	100.0	18.6	4 421 585	100.0	12.1	3 740 940	100.0	10.0

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

Table 3 below shows that in 2020, KwaZulu-Natal is home to the largest number of adults who are illiterate in South Africa (870 000), followed by Eastern Cape (573 000) and Gauteng (534 000). However, although the number of persons in Gauteng who are not literate is high, the illiteracy *rate* in Gauteng, which stands at 5%, is half of the national average, while other provinces recorded illiteracy rates that are above the national average. The highest illiteracy rate is observed in the Eastern Cape (15.2%) followed by Mpumalanga (14.7%) and Limpopo (14.1%).

Table 3: Number and percentage of persons in the population aged 20 and above who have not completed grade 7 and above by province, 2010, 2019 and 2020

Province	2010			2019			2020		
	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate
Eastern Cape	941 679	16.6	26.2	679 400	15.4	18.2	572 393	15.3	15.2
Free State	348 552	6.1	21.2	271 106	6.1	14.9	192 386	5.1	10.7
Gauteng	736 980	13.0	9.2	579 664	13.1	5.6	533 606	14.3	5.0
KwaZulu-Natal	1 238 524	21.8	21.5	979 592	22.2	14.5	870 433	23.3	12.6
Limpopo	776 626	13.7	27.9	582 361	13.2	17.6	478 824	12.8	14.1
Mpumalanga	519 471	9.1	23.2	428 023	9.7	15.5	420 248	11.2	14.7
North West	552 575	9.7	26.5	437 751	9.9	17.8	336 023	9.0	13.5
Northern Cape	192 977	3.4	28.7	123 974	2.8	16.0	97 014	2.6	12.6
Western Cape	373 108	6.6	10.1	339 714	7.7	7.4	240 013	6.4	5.1
Total	5 680 492	100.0	18.6	4 421 584	100.0	12.1	3 740 940	100.0	10.0

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

Table 4 below shows that illiteracy levels are more prevalent amongst older adults. In 2020, the illiteracy rate was highest amongst 60-64 years old (60.1%) followed by 55-59 years old (24.1%) and 50-54 years old (15.4%). Not surprisingly, younger adults are more literate than older adults because of improved access to education since 1994. Even so, it remains a matter of concern that almost 250 000 persons aged 15-19 have not completed Grade 7 of schooling.

Table 4: Number and percentage of persons in the population who have not completed grade 7 and above by age group, 2010 and 2020

Age Group	2010			2019			2020		
	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate	Number	% Share	Illiteracy rate
15-19yrs	468 023	9.5	9.1	273 780	8.2	5.9	249 900	9.2	5.2
20-24yrs	273 759	5.6	5.1	168 264	5.0	3.5	90 726	3.3	1.9
25-29yrs	345 196	7.0	7.0	190 108	5.7	3.5	109 863	4.0	2.0
30-34yrs	336 698	6.9	8.6	252 375	7.5	4.6	201 091	7.4	3.6
35-39yrs	390 863	8.0	11.5	305 203	9.1	6.5	211 387	7.8	4.3
40-44yrs	533 340	10.9	18.9	284 801	8.5	7.9	223 755	8.2	6.0
45-49yrs	639 470	13.0	25.7	360 403	10.8	12.1	286 933	10.5	9.3
50-54yrs	701 422	14.3	33.5	452 181	13.5	18.5	384 427	14.1	15.4
55-59yrs	653 955	13.3	38.2	540 381	16.1	25.8	515 339	18.9	24.1
60-64yrs	560 503	11.4	43.3	524 633	15.7	31.1	451 056	16.6	26.1
Total	4 903 228	100.0	14.8	3 352 128	100.0	8.8	2 724 476	100.0	7.0

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

5. Conclusion

The analysis in this fact sheet shows a significant reduction in the adult illiteracy rates in South Africa. However, it is a matter of deep concern that 3.7 million adults in South Africa are still illiterate. It is evident therefore Community Education and Training (CET) colleges need to continue to provide Adult Basic Education and Training in order to further reduce illiteracy in South Africa. The focus should be on providing ABET programmes in provinces where there are the highest number of illiterate adults. The CET sector needs to set a target for reducing illiteracy rates and ensure the provisioning of quality ABET programmes that address illiteracy.