



higher education & training

Department:
Higher Education and Training
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

NATIONAL LITERACY FOR EMPOWERMENT CAMPAIGN LAUNCH AT LOVEDALE TVET COLLEGE, KING WILLIAM'S TOWN, EASTERN CAPE ON THE 12th MAY 2026.

The Programme Director,

The Director-General of the Department of Higher Education
and Training, Dr Nkosinathi Sishi,

The Leadership of the National House of Traditional and
Khoisan Leaders,

Senior Officials from the Department of Higher Education and
Training,

The Leadership and Representatives from the Mining
Qualifications Authority,

The Leadership and Representatives from our various Sector
Education and Training Authorities,

The Leadership and Representatives from Old Mutual,

The Representatives from Higher Health,

The Representatives from SALGA,
The Representatives from NEMISA,
The Chairperson of Project Management South Africa (PMSA),
The Leadership of our CET Colleges,
The Students from our CET Colleges,
Community Members, Partners and Stakeholders,
Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Good morning. Molweni nonke

Thirty years into our democracy, millions of South Africans still remain locked out of opportunities because they cannot read, write, or access the tools required to participate meaningfully in the economy and society.

It is for this reason that this moment carries with it such great significance. This is more than just a launch of another government programme. It is a clarion call to action. A call to restore dignity, to expand opportunity, and to ensure that no South African is left behind because they are deprived of the

transformative power of literacy. The launch further takes place during a pivotal moment in our national and continental journey.

This year marks exactly thirty years since the adoption of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. A Constitution founded on fundamental rights such as the rights to dignity, equality, and freedom. We also recognise and accept that these constitutional rights cannot be fully realised, if millions of our people remain excluded from literacy, skills, and access to opportunity.

We are also gathered here, today, during Africa Month. A month that reminds us of the vision of African unity, self-determination, and development. A vision that inspired and shaped the founding of the Organisation of African Unity on 25 May 1963 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

More importantly, this year marks seventy years since the historic Women's March of 1956. It is impossible, ladies and gentlemen, to speak about literacy, in our context, without speaking about women.

The stark and painful reality is that, our country has approximately 3.8 million adults who are illiterate. And more than half of these illiterate adults, are women. The research further shows that the majority of illiterate adults, are found in rural and mining communities as well as in our townships, and economically marginalised areas. Moreover, many are unemployed and were failed by history, by poverty, and by the unequal access to education.

That is why this campaign is so crucial. Literacy is not simply about reading words or numbers on a page. Literacy is about dignity. It is about confidence. It is about independence.

It is about whether a mother can read and complete a clinic form on behalf of her child, whether a worker can apply for a job, whether a grandmother can read a message from her grandchildren, or whether a young person can participate meaningfully in the modern economy.

Today we are launching more than a literacy Campaign. Today we are launching a campaign for empowerment, dignity, and opportunity. The distinction between a literacy campaign and an empowerment campaign is an important one and signifies that we are moving beyond a narrow definition of literacy, to a much broader one.

Yes, we want our people to read and write. But we also want them to develop digital literacy. We want them to develop financial literacy. We want them to develop workplace literacy, civic literacy, and entrepreneurial capabilities. We want literacy to become a bridge to employment, to enterprise, and to lifelong learning.

The partnerships represented here today are so critical to the success of this Campaign. Old Mutual is advancing financial literacy whereas Higher Health is strengthening civic literacy and soft skills development. And the fact that National Electronic Media Institute of South Africa (NEMISA) is expanding digital literacy reflects the broad and integrated approach that is required to empower our communities. Critical to this effort is the

role of the Mining Qualifications Authority (MQA) in community mobilisation. The impact of the W&R SETA and Services SETA in strengthening entrepreneurship and enterprise development capabilities will, also play an important role in expanding economic opportunities for communities.

Together with CET Colleges, which remain at the centre of adult literacy and numeracy, these partnerships affirm the profound reality that the battle against functional illiteracy cannot be fought and won by government alone. It requires a collective national effort not only driven by sound partnerships, but by a shared responsibility, and a common commitment to restoring dignity and expanding opportunity. In order for this Campaign to succeed, it also requires communities. It requires traditional leadership and it requires the private sector.

Ladies and gentlemen, as alluded to earlier at the heart and core of this Literacy Empowerment Campaign lies our Community Education and Training Colleges.

For too long, CET Colleges have not received the attention they deserve. Yet these institutions are uniquely positioned within our communities to become centres of lifelong learning, skills development and second chances.

Our vision, as the Department of Higher Education and Training, is to reposition CET Colleges as the heartbeat of lifelong learning and community renewal in South Africa. But at the same time we must be honest about the challenges confronting many of our CET Colleges across the country.

A considerable number of our CET Colleges continue to operate under difficult conditions which include, amongst other things, poor infrastructure; limited access to land for expansion; unsafe or unsuitable learning environments; food insecurity; and limited or no access to equipment and digital resources.

If we are serious about repositioning CET Colleges, as centres of lifelong learning and community renewal, then we must also be serious about investing in the conditions that will allow proper teaching and learning to flourish in our CET Colleges.

These institutions must become places where a young person who left school due to pregnancy can return with dignity. Where an unemployed adult can acquire skills and training. Where a grandmother can learn to read and write. Where a mineworker can gain digital skills. And where communities can reconnect with education and opportunity.

We are working hard to ensure that CET Colleges become more agile, more responsive, and more accessible.

Through our CET Colleges, we are strengthening pathways into skills programmes, entrepreneurship opportunities, TVET Colleges, and universities. We are also advancing the National Senior Certificate for Adults, commonly known as NASCA, to ensure that the youth and adults who were unable to complete school are able to access an alternative matric pathway and continue with further learning.

We believe deeply that it is never too late to learn. Education must never become the privilege of those who succeeded early in life while abandoning those who require a second chance.

Ladies and gentlemen, there are important lessons we can draw from previous literacy initiatives, including the Kha Ri Gude Mass Literacy Campaign. One of the most important lessons we can draw on, is that successful literacy campaigns are rooted in communities. They succeed when they speak the language of the people, respond to local realities, and restore confidence and hope.

This is, particularly, important as we integrate Indigenous Knowledge Systems into our approaches to teaching and learning. We cannot build an inclusive education system while ignoring the knowledge systems, languages, and lived experiences of our people.

The future of education on our continent must be both globally relevant and locally grounded. The scale of the challenge before us is significant. But so too is the scale of the opportunity.

By 2030, this Literacy for Empowerment Campaign aims to reach one million adult learners across South Africa.

Imagine what this could mean. Imagine one million people gaining access to knowledge, confidence, skills, and economic opportunity. Imagine one million stories of restored dignity and hope. Imagine one million lives transformed. That is the vision before us and this is precisely the reason, why we must approach this Campaign not as any event, but rather as a national commitment.

As I engage with young people, women, unemployed adults, and communities across our country, I am constantly reminded that our people have not lost hope.

What many people need is not charity. They need opportunity. They need support. And they need institutions that believe in their potential and dreams.

Because literacy changes more than individuals. It changes households. It changes communities. And ultimately, it changes nations.

In closing, let me express my sincere appreciation to all the partners, stakeholders, traditional leaders, and institutions who

have joined hands, with the Department of Higher Education and Training, in support of this Campaign.

Your commitment demonstrates that the fight against functional illiteracy is not the responsibility of government alone.

It is a national responsibility. Let us therefore move forward together with urgency, with compassion, and with determination.

Let us build a country where every person, regardless of their age or background, has the opportunity to learn, to grow, and to participate meaningfully in the economy and in society.

And let us ensure that literacy becomes not only a tool for learning, but a pathway to dignity, empowerment, and inclusive development.

I thank you. Ndiyabulela. Ke a leboga.