

## Fighting Adult Illiteracy: ABET, Kha Ri Gude, and the White Paper

### 1. Introduction

To say that literacy levels in South Africa are low is an understatement. South Africa has continuously been ranked in the lower tiers of international assessments such as Progress in International Reading Literacy Studies (PIRLS). On a scale of 0 to 1 000, pupils tested for English and Afrikaans in Grade 5 achieved a score of 421, described in the 2011 PIRLS report as "the lowest for benchmarking participants". According to the PIRLS<sup>1</sup> report, 43% of Grade 5 pupils in South African schools have not developed the basic skills required for reading at an equivalent international Grade 4 level<sup>2</sup>. In the 2012 Annual National Assessments (ANAs) 42% of Grade 9 learners scored between 0 – 29% for their first additional language (FAL).

Not only does South Africa have a problem with poor literacy skills, but it also has huge challenges in stemming the early exodus of learners out of the education system. Only 50% of those who start their 12 year school journey make it to matric. If we assume that those who never complete their schooling form part of the functionally illiterate, then every year the illiterate and functionally illiterate numbers are further swelled. In 2011 South Africa had more than 4 million illiterate adults and about 4.9 million functionally illiterate adults.

What are the educational options for these adults and these so-called NEETS (not in education, employment or training)?

This briefing paper will explore to what extent government programmes such as ABET and Kha Ri Gude are successful in reducing adult illiteracy numbers. In addition the paper also comments on

the recently published White Paper on Post-School Education in order to determine whether the policy adequately addresses adult education.

### 2. ABET

Adult basic education is a right enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution, which states that all citizens have a right "to a basic education, including adult basic education, and to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible". After the tabling of the White Paper on Education in 1995, the Department of Education established a National Directorate for Adult Education and Training (ABET)<sup>3</sup>. In 2000, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) were established to act as the 'T' in ABET – to provide training and skills through learnerships. There are currently 21 SETAs covering all major industries and occupations.

In terms of the policy on ABET, the term 'adult basic education and training'

"subsumes both literacy and post-literacy as it seeks to connect literacy with basic (general) adult education on the one hand and with training for income generation on the other hand. ABET precedes further education and training (FET). Taken together ABET and FET, the two components of adult education and training (AET), progressively initiates adult learners onto a path of lifelong learning and development."<sup>4</sup>

Typically the ABET programmes include training in:

- language, literacy and communication

- mathematical literacy, mathematics and mathematical sciences
- natural science
- arts and culture
- life orientation
- technology
- human and social science
- economic and management science.

Learners can also choose to take courses in:

- small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs)
- wholesale and retail
- travel and tourism
- applied agriculture
- early childhood development
- ancillary health care.

The institutions entrusted by government with delivering a variety of ABET courses are the Public Adult Learning Centres (PALCs) in the various provinces. All other ABET providers, which include non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisation (CBOs), and providers in industry, are classified as Private Adult Learning Centres. These do not receive any form of funding from government, but still need to register with the Department of Basic Education. Some of PALCs run by the Catholic Church are registered with the DHET, however these are classed as Public Centres on Private Property. These centres not only offer GETC programmes but also offer skills training programmes like welding, bricklaying, computers, catering, life skills, etc. There are plans by the DHET to set up a Community Education and Training Centres (CETC) in each province as a pilot and the intention is that these CETCs to partner with existing centres that offer skills which may include the current faith-based centres. The majority of PALCs utilise schools for the provision of adult education and training programmes, and the provision of ABET is regulated through the Adult Education and Training Act<sup>5</sup>. The adult learning centres offer programmes to both adults and out-of-school youth which, in the main, culminate in the General Education and Training Certificate (GETC) qualification, equivalent to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF level 1) and Grade 9. The four ABET levels 1-4 are equivalent to grades 4, 5, 7 and 9.

According to a 2011 study<sup>6</sup> by the Department of Higher Education (DHET), the AET sector is largely publicly funded, with less than two percent of AET centres being funded by the private sector. The study further showed that:

- the AET centres – 3 305 in total – had a study enrolment of almost 300 000;
- the majority of these were located in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo<sup>7</sup>. Although Western Cape had a relatively lower number of AET Centres as compared to Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal, its student enrolment was similar to these two provinces, respectively;
- about 16 000 educators were employed in the AET Centres.

Despite the desperate need for the PALCs, their success is severely hampered by staff shortages. To make matters worse, the majority of teachers in the PALCs are part-time contract workers without tenure because the sector does not have a core of permanent staff. This is a challenge that has been identified in the White Paper and hopefully the sector can finally get the necessary resources to enable it to continue its success.

### 3. Kha Ri Gude

The continued prevalence of adult illiteracy and its negative effect on development and social transformation prompted the government to institute the Kha Ri Gude (Let Us Learn) Mass Literacy Campaign in February 2008, with the intention of enabling 4.7 million adults above the age of 15 years to become literate and numerate. The idea was that this goal would enable South Africa to reach its UNESCO *'Education For All'* commitment<sup>8</sup> made at Dakar in 2000 – that of halving the country's illiteracy rates by 2015. Initiated and managed by the Department of Basic Education, Kha Ri Gude delivers across all nine provinces in a massive logistical outreach. The campaign enables adult learners to read, write and calculate in their mother tongue in line with the Unit Standards for ABET level 1, and also to learn spoken English. The specifically designed campaign materials teach reading, writing and numeracy, and integrate themes and life-skills such as health, gender, the environment and civic education. These materials have been adapted for use in Braille in eleven languages, and for use by the deaf.<sup>9</sup>

Since its inception in 2008, the Kha Ri Gude campaign has reached a claimed 3 million people.

#### 4. The White Paper on Post-School Education

The White Paper sets out strategies to improve the capacity of the post-school education and training system to meet South Africa's needs. It outlines policy directions to guide the DHET and the institutions for which it is responsible in order to contribute to building a developmental state with a vibrant democracy and a flourishing economy. Its main policy objectives are:

- a post-school system that can assist in building a fair, equitable, non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa;
- a single, co-ordinated post-school education and training system;
- expanded access, improved quality and increased diversity of provision;
- a stronger and more co-operative relationship between education and training institutions and the workplace;
- a post-school education and training system that is responsive to the needs of individual citizens, employers in both public and private sectors, as well as broader societal and developmental objectives.

In particular, the White Paper has identified a need to further strengthen the current ABET programmes, as well as providing education opportunities to the large number of 15 - 24 year olds who never attended school – the so called NEETS<sup>10</sup> (not in education, employment or training).

To address the challenges that PALCs face, the White Paper proposes that they are absorbed into community colleges. Community colleges will build on the current offering of the PALCs so as to expand vocational and skills-development programmes and non-formal programmes. The White Paper further states: 'The community colleges will seek to facilitate a cycle of lifelong learning in communities by enabling the development of skills (including literacy, numeracy and vocational skills) . . .' This is a positive development for the provisioning of ABET since it would mean that ABET, and campaigns like Kha Ri Gude, will get the necessary

resources to ensure that they reach as many people as possible. Not only is provision made for the retraining of adult educators, but a qualifications policy for adult educators will be put in place. This policy will describe the appropriate qualifications as well as set the minimum standards for such a qualification.

Since funding has always been one of the major constraints on adult education, it is hoped that through the establishment of community colleges significant investment will be made in the sector. The DHET has proposed in its White Paper that it will provide the core funding, including funding for the permanent teaching and administrative staff. The Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) will provide additional funding, while private funding will also be sought.

#### 5. Conclusion

If adult illiteracy is considered a blight on any society, then South Africa should feel further ashamed that it is also failing its youth. While we can applaud the success of programmes like Kha Ri Gude and some of the strides made through ABET, government should not rest on its laurels but instead seize the momentum. The hope must be that the proposals in the White Paper on Post-School Education become a reality and not just a pipedream. If the current stakeholder discussions with the DHET is anything to go by, it could be more a reality than a pipedream. It has often been said that government is good at policy-making but falls short in implementation. Let us hope that the adult education has finally been accepted as more than just a stepchild.

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<sup>1</sup> PIRLS is an international comparative study aimed at benchmarking literacy/reading levels across countries. Each country's performance is rated on a scale ranging from 0-1000, and 500 points indicates competence. The 2011 study involved 325 000 Grade 4 and 5 learners across 49 countries. South Africa participated in the PIRLS study for the second time in 2011, following our inaugural participation in the 2006 study.

<sup>2</sup> Bongani Nkosi (2012): SA schools at rock bottom in international assessments. Mail & Guardian Online.

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<sup>3</sup> Redewan Larney (2006): ABET programmes at community learning centres in the Western Cape.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Act 52 of 2000

<sup>6</sup> Statistics on Post School Education and Training in South Africa: 2011

<sup>7</sup> The study does not however explain the higher number of AET centres in Limpopo as opposed to the other provinces.

<sup>8</sup> The six goals are: Goal 1: expand early childhood care and education; Goal 2: provide free and compulsory primary education for all; Goal 3: promote learning and life skills for young people and adults; Goal 4: increase adult literacy by 50%; Goal 5: achieve gender parity by 2005, gender equality by 2015; Goal 6: improve the quality of education

<sup>9</sup> [www.kharigude.co.za](http://www.kharigude.co.za)

<sup>10</sup> According to the DHET's White Paper on Post-School Education, in 2013 the NEETS comprised 3.4 million young people; 523 000 of these had only achieved a primary school education or less, and nearly 1.5 million had less than a Grade 10 education.

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