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Adult Basic Education and Training in South Africa

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The Republic of South Africa⁷³ can be classified as a middle-income country, or a country with one foot in the first world and one foot in the developing world. South Africa has a highly sophisticated production and commercial infrastructure, and high gross domestic product and gross national product, which exist alongside high levels of poverty.

South Africa has a low level of literacy, 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. These inequalities affected the delivery of services such as water and sanitation, and also affected the system of education. As a result, according to 2001 census figures (Statistics South Africa, 2001), 4.7 million adults (16% of

⁷³South Africa is situated at the southernmost point of the African continent, bordering Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique and surrounding the kingdoms of Swaziland and Lesotho. Its total land area is 1,219,090 km².

the total population above the age of 15) have had no schooling and may be considered illiterate. A further 9.6 million (32%) have not completed primary school and may be considered in need of compensatory basic education. The majority of these adults are found in rural areas. About 24% of Africans, 10% of “coloreds,”⁷⁴ 7% of Indians, and 1% of Whites over the age of 20 years are illiterate (Aitchison, Houghton, & Baatjes, 2000).

After the first democratic elections in South Africa, the new government faced a number of challenges, not the least being the high number of adults who were functionally illiterate. There were many unemployed people whose levels of literacy were such that they were virtually unemployable due to the competition for the small number of available jobs requiring little or no literacy skills. In addition, low literacy was associated with poverty and a low level of entrepreneurship in both the formal and informal sectors.

Based on its vision of providing a better life for all South Africans, the new government’s Reconstruction and Development Policy⁷⁵ (African National Congress [ANC], 1994) placed great emphasis on community development, in which adult literacy and community development were linked. In addition, the new constitutional and legislative framework (discussed later) states that adult basic education (ABE) is integral to South Africa’s economic growth and development. All key educational policy documents now mention ABE.

The goal of this chapter is to describe the integration of education and training in the adult basic education and training (ABET) system in South Africa. I first discuss the relationship of apartheid, poverty, and health to the status of adult literacy. Then, I discuss the policy and legislative frameworks related to adult literacy, followed by a discussion of the role of teachers in ABET. Finally, I show how in light of the aforementioned, an endeavor was made to provide basic literacy as part of a national literacy program in South Africa.

⁷⁴In terms of apartheid legislation, South Africans were divided along racial lines into African, Asian, and White. Coloreds referred to children of any racial combination of the aforementioned categories. The categories are still used in certain circumstances to monitor employment equity practices.

⁷⁵Literacy was the only reconstruction and development program project that received no funding at all (Aitchison et al., 2000).

APARTHEID AND ILLITERACY

History of Apartheid

One of the Nationalist government's first acts after coming to power in 1948 was to appoint a commission to formulate the principles and aims of education for Natives⁷⁶ as an independent race (Troup, 1976). Pursuant to the recommendations of the commission, the government formulated its legislation in the Bantu Education Act of 1953. The government designed this Act to give Africans⁷⁷ an education conforming to their needs and opportunities as a separate community. Schooling was to be Bantu-ized⁷⁸: The commission proposed low-quality, separate schooling for Africans, who would be trained for subordination.

The philosophy that informed this Act may be gleaned from the words of the Minister of Native Affairs, articulated during a debate in September 1953:

When I have control of native education, I will reform it so that the natives will be taught from childhood to realise that equality with Europeans⁷⁹ is not for them . . . People who believe in equality are not desirable teachers for natives. (Troup, 1976, p. 22)

Apartheid education was designed specifically to enforce obedience, communal loyalty, ethnic divisions, acceptance of allocated social roles, and identification with rural culture. In the words of the Minister of Native Affairs:

There is no place for him [the black child] in the European [white South African] community above the level of certain forms of labour . . . Until now he has been subject to a school system which drew him away from his own community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he is not allowed to graze. (Verwoerd, cited in Troup, 1976, p. 22)

⁷⁶Here referring to Blacks in general, and Africans in particular.

⁷⁷This racial categorization implies those South Africans classified as Black but not Indian, Asian, or so-called coloreds.

⁷⁸Here meaning Black African.

⁷⁹European in this context referred to Whites.

The specific aim of apartheid—and apartheid education—was to keep Africans in a position of subservience and ignorance. In attempting to prepare the African child for a future as “hewers of wood and drawers of water” (Verwoerd, cited in Troup, 1976), the apartheid master plan controlled—economically, socially, psychologically, and spiritually—the education of Black South Africans. This left African parents with two options: exposing their children to inferior Bantu education, or giving them no education at all. Troup (1976) stated that because:

only one African child in every two of school-going age was actually attending school, it was understandable that parents were unwilling to give up an opportunity to get even some inferior education for those lucky enough to have the opportunity. (p. 22)

The lack of compulsory education, and the fact that the schools were sites of the liberation struggle, meant that many children did not attend or had disrupted attendance between 1976 and 1994, leaving many without education, thus contributing to the massive need for ABET within the country.

When the government established democracy in South Africa, the literacy situation was still dismal: The statistics on the number of people who need a basic education fluctuate depending on who is counting and what yardstick is used to measure and define literacy. With 11 official languages, the difficulty of defining literacy is compounded. Adults may be defined as being literate in a national language, but surveys seldom consider the communicative practices of adults who do not speak the (dominant) language of the economy.

Government statistics show that in 1996, 27% of adults had no schooling at all and that 41% of the adult population had completed some (but not all) primary school (i.e., the first 7 years of schooling; Statistics South Africa, 1996). The official data show that by 2002, 54% of the population had completed only some (but not all) primary education (Presidency, 2003). This group appears to have increased in spite of policy changes and the introduction of compulsory education. This latter-mentioned group (as well as those who have not attended any schooling) also reflects the number of South Africans who fall within the scope of ABET. Moreover, South Africa still has large numbers of out-of-school youth, which will maintain the long-term need for ABE.

There is gender difference in illiteracy: 41% of men and 58% women are considered illiterate. Illiteracy rates are higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

The Relation Between Levels of Literacy and Levels of Poverty

In South Africa, approximately 25% of people in urban areas and 67% of people in rural areas live in poverty. The number of people living in poverty in 1999 amounted to 33% of the population (Presidency, 2003). In the context of poverty, education needs to be coupled with helping people acquire skills to generate income and for sustainable livelihoods.

Presently, about 6.8 million people—approximately 16.6% of the population—receive social grants. Although the number of grants to those living in poverty is increasing, it is still difficult for the illiterate poor to access information about the entitlements they could receive, and for them to deal with the banking and bureaucracy surrounding accessing these grants.

With 33% of the South African population living below the poverty line, the number of job opportunities is shrinking and unemployment rates are rising. This makes creating jobs a pressing issue. Currently, the official unemployment figure is cited at 40% (Presidency, 2003).⁸⁰ However, official figures always mask a multitude of problems in the world of work; one problem is that official figures do not factor in the number of unemployed people who have given up trying to find work and are no longer considered to be part of the unemployed workforce.

The recent introduction of social grants offers an indirect indication of those who are unemployed and regarded as the “poorest of the poor,” and who engage in “survivalist” informal economic activities. “The number of people engaged in survivalist economic activities have declined with the introduction of the social welfare grants” (Presidency, 2003, p. 17). Statistics South Africa (2004) referred to a 22% decline in informal sector activities in the period between 2002 and 2003. Over the same period, the number of welfare grant beneficiaries increased by 40%.

Poverty in rural areas is estimated to be as high as 67%, due to poor social and economic conditions in rural areas, the lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity and transportation, and the lack of employment opportunities. Without infrastructure, it is difficult for people to engage in entrepreneurial activities. Most small-scale businesses require, for example,

⁸⁰There was an increase of 2,361,834 unemployed adults in the period between 1995 and 2002. In 1995, there were 1,909,468 people officially estimated as being unemployed. This number increased to 4,271,302 by 2002.

electricity for refrigeration and cooking, and transportation for selling. In general, women in rural areas are poorer than men (Presidency, 2003), a fact that can be explained by both their disadvantaged position in the labor market and the patriarchal relations of ownership within the family structure.

The problems of poverty are more acute for new arrivals in the urban informal (or squatter) settlements where residents live in shacks and find themselves without services, employment, or reliable social networks. Previously the numbers of urban and rural dwellers were more or less equal. However, with many people migrating from rural to urban areas in search of jobs and decent services, the urban population has increased. Presently, 55% of the population lives in urban areas. About 20% of all households live in shacks without services such as water and sanitation, road infrastructure, or electricity (Statistics South Africa, 2004).

South African women bear the burden of poverty because they are mainly responsible for managing the households and feeding children and eking out a living under the difficult circumstances of poverty, especially in situations in which women are the heads of households. Forty-five percent of female-headed households live below the poverty line, as opposed to 26% of male-headed households. If women are able to obtain employment,⁸¹ they find it more difficult than men to cope with their jobs (McKay, Mokotong, & Sham, 2003) because they have the double burden of having to work and carry out their traditional functions at home.

The situation of the nation's poor is exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has decimated jobs and eroded household income. In the long term, the workforce of the future is also weakened as children are taken out of school early to help care for sick family members.

In spite of the current policy of universal primary schooling, the most telling education statistic reported by Statistics South Africa (2004) is that, between 1995 and 2002, the school system recorded an enrollment increase of just 0.1%, despite a school-age population increase of 15%. These data reflect not only the growing and future need for ABE, but also the percentage of children who are not in schools due to the high HIV infection rate. In 2004 it was estimated that there were 2.2 million

⁸¹The highest levels of poverty in South Africa are found in the rural areas where women tend to head households, many as wives left behind by men who form part of the migrant worker network in the cities and towns, or single parents or even grandmothers caring for children (in particular AIDS orphans). Many of these older women have had to reenter activities associated with childrearing and income generation to ensure the survival of the second generation.

orphaned children in South Africa who had lost a parent. It was estimated that nearly half of all orphans were orphaned as a result of AIDS-related illnesses. These children are often compelled to leave school to look after their siblings. They are particularly vulnerable to abuse and, in turn, to contracting HIV. With projections suggesting that about one in five children of school-going age in South Africa will be orphaned by 2010, school dropout rates can be expected to increase (Hooper-Box, 2002). This highlights the ongoing need for literacy and basic education for the increasing numbers of children who do not and who will not complete primary school.

PRESENT POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

ABET is closely linked in South Africa. To fully understand the implications of the integration of ABET in South Africa, it is important to understand the difference: ABE refers to the educational base that individuals require to improve their life chances. Adult basic training refers to the foundational income-generating or occupational skills that individuals require to improve their livelihoods and living conditions. Putting the two together, ABET supplies the foundational knowledge, skills, understanding, and abilities that are required for improved social and economic life. When programs bring education and training together, individuals can acquire the full range of knowledge, skills, understanding, and abilities. These kinds of programs also provide learners with a platform for further learning, should they so choose, and with the capacity to bring this foundation to bear on the improvement and development of their own lives and the lives of those around them. ABET provides the foundation of fundamental skills, knowledge, and understanding that gives people a basis from which they can progress along a chosen career and life path (Department of Education, 1997).

It is important to note that the T in ABET refers to more than technical or employment skills. The T refers to a wide range of skills and expertise including technical skills such as plumbing, dressmaking, beadwork, and other crafts, together with specialized skills such as conflict management and negotiation, and also creative skills such as dance and praise poetry or the ritual chanting and singing verses of praise for esteemed people.⁸²

⁸²Praise poetry and singing for esteemed people form part of the rich tradition of South African society.

Since 1994, the South African government has promulgated a suite of policies and legislative frameworks that support ABE and affirm its role in the process of social change and development. There is acceptance that literacy is essential for human resource development because it contributes to the economic development of people and enables them to expand their life choices. The postapartheid government regards ABET as critical to addressing the basic needs and developmental imperatives of the majority of South Africa's poor. For this reason, literacy underlies (at least at the policy level) the government's proposals⁸³ for human resource development, focusing on skills acquisition and ABE for those who have been deprived of basic schooling (ANC, 1994).

The definition of ABET as propounded in the government policies discussed later implies more than just literacy: ABET is intended to serve a range of social, economic, and developmental needs. It has been constitutionally enshrined as a basic right of all citizens and a "legal entitlement to which every person has a claim." The South African legislation discussed here also describes ABET as the foundation for justice and equality and as contributing to the core values adopted for South Africa: democracy (active participation), access (redressing historical imbalances), and development (Baatjes, 2004).

The specific government acts or policy documents that promote or relate to adult education have included the following:

- Interim Guidelines for ABET (1995).
- South African Qualifications Act (1995).
- National Education Policy Act (1996).
- South African Constitution (1996).
- National Multi-Year Implementation Plan for adult education and training in the Department of Education (1997).
- Skills Development Act (1998).
- Skills Development Levy Act (1999).

A consideration of the legislative framework for ABET is crucial as a backdrop to understanding the gap between legislation and implementation, a gap that exists because of bureaucratic bottlenecks, lack of capacity, inadequate resources for the sector, and general disagreements within

⁸³These proposals include the range of social grants for people living in poverty and the public works programs intended to create more than 1 million jobs while upgrading roads and other infrastructure.

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the sector. Although South Africa has highly impressive legislation for ABET, the fact that an extremely small amount of the education budget is allocated to ABET makes it inevitable that policy is barely implemented (Aitcheson et al., 2000).

Interim Guidelines for the implementation of ABET (Department of Education, 1995) state that, as a result of the high attrition rates in schools and the high number of adults who never attended school, millions of adult South Africans are functionally illiterate, making clear the need for accelerating the development of an ABET system. The Interim Guidelines emphasize that the provision of ABET is linked to the development of human resources within the broader strategy for national development, and that ABET is aimed at restructuring the economy, addressing past inequalities, and contributing to the creation of a democratic society. ABET has to provide people with the basic foundation for lifelong learning and equip them with the skills and critical capacity to participate fully in society. Although these guidelines refer to all adults who “would like to participate” in ABET programs, women (and, in particular, rural inhabitants), out-of-school youth, the unemployed, prisoners and ex-prisoners, and adults with disabilities are singled out as needing special attention and special motivation.

In 1995, the government established the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), which helped develop the South African Qualifications Act (No. 58 of 1995). One of SAQA’s key functions was to develop and implement the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which:

- Created a national framework for learning achievements.
- Facilitated access to—and mobility and progression within—education, training, and career paths.
- Enhanced the quality of education and training.
- Accelerated the redress of past discrimination in education, training, and employment opportunities.
- Contributed to the full personal development of each learner and the social development of the nation at large.

The central function of the NQF was to accredit unit standards, which culminate in qualifications for even basic-level learners. It permits portability, accessibility, and transferability of skills, knowledge, and abilities across qualification levels and across the education and training divide.

The National Education Policy Act (No. 27 of 1996) also protects the right to basic education; in particular, “the right of every person to basic

education and equal access to education institutions.” The right to a basic education implies, by extension, the right to good-quality learning programs with high-quality learner support materials and teaching practices, and appropriate learning sites. The Policy observes that as a result of the high attrition rate in schools, millions of adult South Africans are functionally illiterate. This chapter thus stresses the need for targeting out-of-school youth for basic education.

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) states:

Everyone has the right to a basic education including adult basic education and to further education which the state through reasonable measures must make available all forms of organised education and training that meet the basic learning needs of adults, including literacy and numeracy, as well as the general knowledge, skills and values and attitudes that they require to survive, develop their capacities, live and work in dignity, improve the quality of their lives, make informed decisions, and continue learning.

Section 29 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996) establishes the right to: (a) a basic education, including ABE; and (b) further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible (section 29 [1]). Although the constitution defines ABE as a human right—a sentiment also expressed in all education and training legislation—the decline in learners enrolled in basic educational programs and the decline in resources draw attention to the lack of fit between policy and practice.

The Multi-Year Implementation Plan (Department of Education, 1997) stressed the need to target out-of-school youth (as well as other categories of learners, such as the disabled, women, and prisoners). It outlined the proposed model for delivery of all ABET services and spelled out the criteria and norms for quality ABET delivery. The plan aimed to serve 2.5 million learners by the year 2001. However, the plan was not translated into deliverable outcomes and the state did not reach even one third of this number by that time (Aitchison et al., 2000).

Some studies, such as those done by Aitchison and colleagues (2000), French (2002), and the Human Sciences Research Council (1999), even suggest that there has been a decline in ABET provision and delivery while the sector is becoming increasingly marginalized: Funding allocated to ABET is only 0.83% of the national education budget and delivery of ABET programs has declined. In addition, there is a lack of recognition of adult educators and their status is poor.

The National Skills Development Act (1998) underscored the government's commitment to overall human resource development, which included education reform. The Act stipulated that for South Africans to participate meaningfully in the country's economic and social development, as well as in their own advancement, they must have basic competencies, including the ability to read, write, communicate effectively, and solve problems in their homes, communities, and workplaces.

The National Skills Development Act (1998) and the Skills Development Levy Act (1999), introduced by the Department of Labor, reflected the government's commitment to promoting active labor market policies. These acts provided new institutions, programs, and funding policies for skills development. Under the auspices of the acts, the government established a number of sectoral education and training authorities (SETAs), which would act as education and training custodians in their respective sectors.⁸⁴ These bodies were established and charged with the responsibility of transforming the skills base in their respective sectors through the implementation of targeted training at all levels of the workforce.

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS IN ABET

The delivery of quality adult education depends on well-trained adult practitioners who play a pivotal role in addressing critical economic, political, and social problems specific to learners across a variety of contexts (e.g., health and HIV/AIDS, the environment, labor, etc.), as well as across a variety of societal contexts—urban, rural, informal, and so on. Well-trained practitioners can do much to enhance the quality of the learning experience for adults (UNESCO, 1998).

The National Education Policy Investigation (1993) conducted by the ANC found that there was a need for 100,000 adult basic educators. This study suggested that distance education offered the only feasible way of meeting such targets, due to the fact that educators and learners were not always in the same place. In South Africa, a number of modes are used to mediate this, such as audio and visual approaches, including television, video, and radio (depending on the context of the learners and the infrastructure available). Information and computer technologies are also included as a mode for some distance-learning contexts.

⁸⁴In line with the skills legislation, SETAs were established for a number of sectors (although several were merged and new ones were introduced). They cut across sectors such as local government and water, mining, the chemical SETA, health, education, building, and so on.

Accordingly, the University of South Africa (UNISA) undertook large-scale training of adult educators in South Africa to develop a more professional cadre. UNISA utilized a blended approach to distance education using some contact (tutor-led) training sessions during which learning is mediated and learners are given support to access their materials. The massive enrollment of training practitioners at UNISA and the pressure they brought to bear on the Department of Education led to the recognition of adult educators in the Educators' Act as a specific category of educator personnel. In the past 4 years, South Africa has begun to establish practitioner qualifications. SAQA established the Standards Generating Body (SGB) in 1999. The SGB produced unit standards for four ABET qualifications in 2000; the unit standards ensure competence and quality of ABET practitioners. The generation of unit standards signaled a breakthrough in establishing a qualification framework and creating a career path for ABET practitioners. The adult educator fraternity (primarily comprised of practitioner training providers such as the universities) regards the development of a qualification framework for adult practitioners by the SGB (Adult Learning National Standards Body 05, which oversaw the development of qualifications and standards for education, training, and development practitioners) as one of the most significant areas of development in the training of practitioners for the ABET field.

Teacher Tasks and Responsibilities

Under the Adult Learning National Standards Body 05, the adult educator is required to assume a variety of complex roles and functions pertaining to education, training, and development. The following tasks and responsibilities, laid out by the SGB, give some indication of the skills educators need:

- Plan a learning event.
- Facilitate an adult learning event.
- Assess learners within a learning situation.
- Fulfill administrative requirements of a learning group.
- Evaluate own facilitation performance.
- Help learners with language and literacy across the curriculum.
- Identify and respond to learners who have special needs.
- Facilitate mother-tongue literacy.
- Facilitate an additional language.
- Facilitate numeracy.
- Design, organize, and facilitate a program of learning.

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- Evaluate, select, and adapt published learning materials.
- Develop, use, and evaluate own supplementary learning aids.
- Design, implement, and follow up on internal assessment.
- Conduct research related to the learning situation.
- Mediate language, literacy, and math across the curriculum.
- Identify and respond to learners with special needs and barriers to learning.
- Promote lifelong learning.
- Facilitate communication and math.
- Undertake a leadership role in an ABET division of an organization.
- Supervise the work of other ABET practitioners.
- Apply extended skills around research, evaluation, quality assurance, and community development.
- Have sufficient command of the subjects to be taught.
- Offer specialist input on particular aspects of ABET provision.

In addition to mastering these unit standards, practitioners may specialize in a range of electives, from facilitating craftwork or subsistence agriculture, to workplace and occupational programs and small and microenterprises.

For a practitioner to assume these functions, training has to be well conceptualized and presented. One of the main providers of practitioner training in South Africa is the ABET Institute at UNISA, which was established in 1994 in response to the democratic government's expressed desire to reconstruct and develop communities in South Africa. To fulfill this aim, the ABET Institute trains a cadre of practitioners who work in adult education programs across various sectors and in different social contexts (e.g., health, environment, the workplace, and water management) and in different types of settlements (urban, rural, formal, and informal). The recognition that ABE needs to be set up as an interministerial and cross-sectoral program is intended to promote key socioeconomic benefits, especially for the most marginalized and disadvantaged communities, which are the Institute's primary target group. Training ABET practitioners in basic and generic skills allows them to work in a variety of specialized areas, including literacy, numeracy, primary health care and HIV/AIDS, English as a second language, small business development, and environmental education.

With the development and enhancement of livelihoods as the prime rationale for the courses presented by the ABET Institute, the Institute addresses literacy or numeracy needs by locating them within a broader development paradigm. This point of departure made the ABET Institute immediately different from programs that focused primarily on literacy as

a method or as a technique and rarely on literacy as a component of a development strategy. The ABET Institute sees the practitioner as central to the enhancement of communities and trains practitioners—nurses, community workers, literacy volunteers, trade unionists, and so on—who will be able to teach skills like basic literacy, numeracy, or health education but with a developmental bias.

For this reason, the ABET Institute program is useful to a variety of in-service and preservice practitioners, including the following:

- Literacy practitioners.
- Trainers for water and sanitation.
- Trainers in health, nutrition, HIV/AIDS, and family planning.
- Environmental educators.
- Job-skills trainers.
- Trade unionists.
- Worker educators.
- Adult educators who teach in state programs.
- Agricultural extension workers.
- Youth workers.
- Community organizers.
- Materials developers.⁸⁵

The distance education program trains up to 12,000 ABET practitioners per year (more than 50,000 practitioners in total since 1994), who work in a variety of fields in community development and community education. The training uses a “blended” approach (part distance, part face-to-face), in which practitioners read assigned text on their own, supplemented by audiotapes and videotapes, and accompanied by regular contact with a designated tutor in their region. It is only by way of distance education that it has been possible to enable the training to reach such a large number of practitioners.

After successfully completing the ABET practitioner course, teachers should be able to demonstrate that they are competent in a range of activities, from conducting research into the learning needs and difficulties of learners and communities to assessing learners’ competencies. Specifically, they should be able to do the following:

⁸⁵The program has been evaluated continuously over the past 10 years by the U.K. Department for International Development (DFID) teams, including experts such as Professor Lalage Bown and Dr. Anil Bordia. The materials used for training educators received the Commonwealth of Learning award for the best distance materials in 2003.

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- Utilize a range of teaching and facilitation methods.
- Utilize a range of assessment methods.
- Refer learners with complex learning difficulties to other professionals.
- Develop teaching material.
- Relate teaching to social context.
- Identify area of research.
- Design a research approach.
- Compile research reports.
- Utilize a variety of qualitative, quantitative, and participatory research methods.

Practitioners are also expected to achieve the following critical outcomes:

- Engage in problem solving.
- Participate in group or syndicate task groups.
- Organize group activities.
- Collect and evaluate information.
- Communicate ideas.
- Understand the world as a set of interrelated systems.
- Use science and technology appropriately.

These critical outcomes are taught indirectly through methodological processes embedded in the Institute's courses. Regardless of whether they are studying for a doctoral degree or a first-year certificate, they should master the critical outcomes.

EXAMPLES OF ABET PROGRAMS IN SOUTH AFRICA: SANLI, NATIONAL PUBLIC WORKS CAMPAIGN, AND EXTENDED PUBLIC WORKS CAMPAIGN

The South African National Literacy Initiative: A Campaign Endeavor

As has been discussed previously, one of the biggest challenges facing South Africa is poverty, particularly in the rural areas and informal settlements, which are characterized by poor social and economic conditions, lack of basic infrastructure such as electricity and transportation, and lack of employment opportunities. Within this context, reducing the level of

illiteracy is but one of the many challenges for the South African government. The South African National Literacy Initiative (SANLI) was conceived as a rapid response initiative with the expressed aim of responding to the then Minister of Education's commitment to "breaking the back of illiteracy among adults and youth."

Accordingly, SANLI stressed the importance of enabling learners to obtain literacy and numeracy competence, which would enable them to relate what they learned to their day-to-day activities. In this way, SANLI proposed to provide basic skills that were relevant and applicable to the lives and contexts of its intended target audience. Its concern for contextual relevance is a theme that emerges throughout its strategy and would be achieved, *inter alia*, through needs analyses and the development and customization of learning materials for specific provinces and varied target groups.

The aims of SANLI were as follows:

- To reduce illiteracy levels in each province by at least 35% by 2004.
- To enable the majority of newly literate adults to take up referrals to further education and economic opportunities.
- To ensure that 60% of newly literate adults maintained their skills through keeping contact with, and accessing materials in, the local resource centers and community development projects.

SANLI proposed, by 2004, to reach at least 65% of the adults who were currently illiterate or semiliterate, an aim that was heavily reliant on the success of the mobilization campaigns and the availability of resources. If the targets set by the initiative were only partially reached, SANLI would nevertheless have achieved a significant contribution to the country's human resource development strategy; this potential underpins the relevance of the initiative. At a national level, these were SANLI's targets:

- To reach 220,000 learners in the first year of the intervention and recruit 2,400 volunteer educators.
- To reach 440,000 learners in the second year of the intervention and recruit 44,000 educators.
- To maintain a learner:educator ratio of 10:1.

In accomplishing these aims, SANLI proposed to mobilize illiterate and semiliterate adults to access literacy programs. A strategy targeted at

potential learners needs to address the added dimensions of getting learners into classrooms and providing a variety of support mechanisms for encouraging them to continue until they have achieved the level of learning they initially hoped to reach. In addition, the literacy initiative needed to look beyond the initial stage of learning to read and write, to the continuity of those newly acquired skills. In this regard, SANLI proposed a continuum from preliteracy to postliteracy initiatives including mainstream ABET programs and other educational, social, and economic opportunities, and to expand the participation of all South Africans in the new democracy. The program, currently in its fourth year, is aimed at all adults who have not had the opportunity to attend school or who only attended for a short period, but it targets, in particular, women and out-of-school youth.

SANLI's delivery strategy is to use other agencies already involved in the provision of adult literacy. In this way, the Ministry proposes to go to scale so that the project can reach its targeted number of enrollments.

The UNISA–SANLI Partnership. In 2002, UNISA's ABET Institute was able to harness its graduates to volunteer to teach in SANLI. Some of the volunteers had previous experience teaching in small grassroots programs or even in the public adult learning centers, but for many SANLI provided a first opportunity to put into practice the skills they acquired during their training. Although volunteers were paid a small stipend for each class they taught, the campaign was marketed by community radio, educators going door-to-door to recruit learners, chiefs, counselors, faith-based groups, and community-based organizations. Educators carried out mapping exercises with the communities to identify households with adults who were to be targeted for the literacy initiative.

The UNISA–SANLI partnership focused on delivering literacy training to the most needy learners across the country in some of South Africa's most isolated and impoverished communities. The ABET Institute mobilized its graduate educators to volunteer to teach basic literacy, numeracy, English, and life-skill education to adults needing basic education. The ABET Institute's goal was to make 75,000 adults literate—a target that was exceeded within the first few months of the partnership. The volunteer educators identified learners and profiled the learners' competencies. Those who were assessed as illiterate were placed in a learning group close to where they lived. Learners were required to attend three classes per week for a period of 9 months. Over this period they completed 25 assessment activities; the completion of these activities meant that they

had achieved a level of competence equivalent to the first 3 years of formal schooling.

Since 2002, the ABET Institute has consistently achieved its annual targets, reaching more than 350,000 learners (who were taught by 8,880 volunteer educators and supported and monitored by teams of monitors or coordinators) over its 2-year life span. The widespread introduction of SANLI classes in all nine provinces has provided a critical mass of adults attending literacy classes, so that the process has taken on a momentum of its own (Bordia, 2003).

The UNISA–SANLI partnership has also been instrumental in developing the necessary management support systems to effectively control, review, and evaluate activities across the country. This includes creating a database to facilitate payment of expenses to the volunteer educators, and to monitor the learners' growing competencies by recording their scores on various tasks in their structured-assessment portfolio.

The South African ministry's partnership with the ABET Institute established learning centers in the communities where the learners live, a successful delivery structure for literacy and development opportunities throughout the country. Unlike other initiatives, which rely on volunteers who have received only short periods of training, the UNISA–SANLI campaign volunteer practitioners have received at least 1 year of training. In fact, many have been trained for up to 3 years and a significant number hold postgraduate qualifications.

The mass recruitment of learners by the UNISA–ABET Institute for the SANLI classes in 2002 and 2003 meant that UNISA had to distribute more than 600 tons of learner support materials to learners across South Africa before the classes could begin. Most classes were held in rural locations, which meant that volunteer educators had to pick up materials at one of approximately 600 appointed sites across South Africa, and they often carried boxes of books for their classes on their heads.

Because the SANLI campaign was run across South Africa, it was not possible for the UNISA ABET Institute to obtain venues wherever they were needed. Volunteer educators were required to first recruit their learners, and then obtain an appropriate venue for classes. Although most of the educators were able to access learning sites at schools, government offices, clinics, churches, and so on, a number of educators were not able to obtain venues that were equipped for teaching. Therefore, many classes were held in sites such as the local market, a learner's home, garages, under a bridge or tree, in unused shipping containers, or in any other makeshift "classroom" that they could find. For these situations, portable

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chalkboards were designed and constructed for educators to hang under a tree or on a hook on the wall.

Assessing the Competencies of the UNISA–SANLI Learners. Within weeks of the initiation of the campaign, the ABET Institute had developed a structured portfolio comprising 24 tasks with which to measure learners' competencies. The sequenced competency-based activities (or common assessment tasks) tested learners against the outcomes for ABET Level 1. The activities were sufficiently generic for learners from almost all social contexts—from rural or urban areas, and for a wide range of age groups, environments, and needs. Learners had to complete activities such as these:

- 1 Draw a map of the area where you live. Your friend wants to visit you. Write down the directions you would give him/her so that he/she can get to your house. Put a cross on the map to show where he/she is (e.g., taxi rank, church, chief's house). Make sure you have marked such places on the map.
- 2 Look at the book you are writing in. How big is it? Take a ruler and measure:

What is the length of the book?
.....cm

What is the width of the book?
.....cm

How thick is the book?
.....mm
3. Find something in your environment that you can measure.

What will you measure?
.....

Write down the measurements
.....

The program distributed assessment criteria and calibration information for the activities to the educators and required them to continuously assess their learners. The educators were then required to engage the services of a peer educator to moderate their assessments, a process that was overseen by

their coordinator.⁸⁶ When learners completed all the activities, educators submitted each learner's results (accompanied by a common assessment test) to the ABET Institute for moderation. If they completed all activities satisfactorily, they were deemed competent and were then certified and recorded in the National Learners' database.

Results of the UNISA–SANLI Partnership. Evaluations (Bordia, 2003) of the program indicate that the learning centers attracted 30,000 more learners each year than was originally targeted, and dropout rates were less than 5%. Learner attendance was regular and learners continued their own learning groups after the conclusion of the campaign. During monitoring visits made by the Department for International Development evaluation team (Bordia, 2003) to literacy learning sites, adult learners who had been attending adult literacy classes in a variety of sites, including shelters for street children and prisons (UNISA ABET, 2003) expressed what literacy meant to them:

The world was painful because I used to use a cross when I signed a document and sometimes I would be doubtful of the implications.

—(An elderly learner in UNISA–SANLI class, Soshanguvu)

My husband, who is blind, enjoys it when I read for him. Learning to read and write has made our lives happy. Even our children who stay far from us always ask me about this project.

—(A UNISA–SANLI learner and pensioner,
Makenenge Ridge, Qwa Qwa)

I was always sad and depressed. Not any more. Now I wake up every day, pick up my books and stop complaining. My life feels good!

—(A UNISA–SANLI learner, Mabopane ABET Centre)

We now know our rights and I can now start a chicken business.

—(Elderly learner in UNISA–SANLI class, East Rand)

⁸⁶Educators were arranged in a cascade comprised of provincial coordinators, each supervising 10 to 15 monitors who each supervised the work of 10 to 15 educators.

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Through the learning that I gained in the project, being a shoemaker, I can now count the number of stitches as I combine the sole and the top part of the shoe. This is very helpful because I can now make measurements.

—(A 65-year-old man in UNISA–SANLI class, The Makenenge Rural Centre)

I have opened a spaza [informal] shop—I can now count money and I have bought a fridge with the money I have made.

—(A female UNISA–SANLI learner, Western Cape)

We have class in this primary school [a mud and dung structure]. Sometimes the children will visit us in class. They watch us learn, we hug them, and then they leave. The children are very proud of us.

—(A mother of five, UNISA–SANLI learner, The Makenenge Rural Centre)

I have started to teach my grandchildren numbers and letters of the alphabet and it is very exciting.

—(An elderly woman, UNISA–SANLI learner, Duduza)

I can now read my own letters. I used to hate it when the person reading my letters used to laugh at what the letter said before I knew what was in the letter.

(An adult UNISA–SANLI learner, Gauteng)

I can read a letter for myself without the risk of being lied to.

(A 49-year-old UNISA–SANLI learner, Gauteng)

I can now read and write my own love letters. I can now write about my feelings of love.

(Young wife of a migrant worker, UNISA–SANLI Eastern Cape)

We need to be in a position of being able to write letters to our family and to protect our privacy.

(Male prisoner UNISA–SANLI learner, Johannesburg Prison)

If I knew then what I know now, I would never have landed up here.

—(30-year-old female prisoner UNISA–SANLI learner)

The Future of the UNISA–SANLI Campaign. All campaigns have a life span. Although the UNISA–SANLI partnership had a very limited life span with minimal political support, the campaign served to heighten the awareness of adults (in particularly of rural adults) of the importance of becoming literate (UNISA ABET, 2003). Without budgetary support, the campaign cannot continue, and it is unlikely that the South African government will commit resources to reviving the campaign. As the Minister of Education explained in his March 2000 reply to a national assembly debate, “Of course I am concerned about the inadequacy of public funding for ABET, including the National literacy campaign. But in my call to action document . . . I made it clear that public funds are at present insufficient for this purpose.”

The ABET Institute and its 10,000 campaign operatives trained by UNISA ABET face the daily tragedy of seeing adults clamoring to learn but being unable to access the flexible learning possibilities made available by the UNISA–SANLI.

The number of SANLI learners in 2002 and 2003 exceeded any other government and nongovernmental organization programs for ABET delivery within South Africa. The Ministry of Education had previously stated that it would offer a postcampaign and postliteracy education for new literates but it has not fulfilled this promise due to lack of funding. However, the current Minister for Education, Minister Pandor, is looking at the SANLI design in relation to campaigns of other countries (notably the Cuban-driven campaign in Venezuela) in hopes of establishing a literacy campaign in South Africa starting in 2007.

Clearly, the SANLI campaign and the work undertaken by the UNISA ABET Institute may be seen as a valuable “pilot” for any larger literacy campaign. In the interim, it is necessary for other government agencies to continue to provide basic education. In the section that follows, two of the main ABET providers (both of which are associated with the Ministry of Labour and not Education) appear to be leading the struggle for a literate South Africa.

National Public Works Campaigns

As indicated earlier, the National Skills Development Act defined 25 SETAs,⁸⁷ which are established by the Department of Labour. Each SETA

⁸⁷This refers to a variety of sectors, such as health, retail, military, and so on.

allocates a budget for ABET, which makes lifelong education a real possibility, as the various programs need to target specific sectoral groups, such as health workers; construction, service industry, or manufacturing workers; workers in local government, water, or environment; and so on. The SETAs have made it possible for the campaign to reach a wide spectrum of stakeholders, such as traditional healers, taxi drivers, and informal sector workers (those workers who are not employed within the mainstream economy and who sell their services and products on the streets). The new health care and HIV/AIDS programs all require training, including literacy training.

Whereas the SETA programs disburse funding for the education and training of workers who are employed in respective sectors, workers who are unemployed and who fall outside of the net are served by a National Skills Fund or via the proposed Extended Public Works Programs (EPWPs). In this way, it is hoped that large numbers of adults may receive training where they are employed. The National Skills Fund makes funding available for those adults who are in need of basic education and training but who are not employed.

The Extended Public Works Programs

President Mbeki announced the creation of the EPWPs in his State of the Nation address in February 2003. The Department of Labour heralded the EPWPs as a central pillar of the South African government's strategy to address poverty and unemployment. The newly launched EPWP was described as being able to do the following:

- Create and maintain essential infrastructure, such as roads and school buildings for communities in high-poverty areas.
- Address poverty and unemployment through the creation of work.
- Transfer skills from skills-development facilitators and trainers to the unskilled workforce.

The EPWP was expected to “contribute to job creation, reinforcement of infrastructure investment and maintenance, provision for higher education transformation and skills development, and further investment in municipal infrastructure and services” (Manuel, cited in McKay, Mokotong, & Morr, 2004, p. 17). The EPWP was designed to give workers training in specific areas on a certain number of workdays per person. In addition, workers will be given on-the-job training to improve their ability to earn an income in the future.

Within the context of increasing unemployment, the EPWP complements and enriches existing⁸⁸ skills-development programs aimed at employment generation and poverty alleviation. Through the EPWP, the Department of Labour expects to create 1 million jobs (albeit mostly temporary work) to address conditions of poverty and joblessness.

Collectively, the three goals given—the creation of infrastructure, the creation of work, and the transfer of skills (job skills and basic education)—underlie the rationale for the EPWP. The challenge is now for the program to achieve tangible results for all three goals and this cannot be done without ensuring first that people have a sufficient level of literacy and numeracy for them to learn job-related skills. Moreover, the work environment requires that people acquire a minimal level of life skills to be able to cope with everyday matters like working out a budget, buying on credit, or dealing with conflict. ABET as an essential component of the EPWP makes literacy accessible to many more people who have not as yet been reached through other interventions.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE OF ADULT LITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICA LOOK LIKE?

Although the EPWP aims to develop skills, the EPWP pilot programs have tended to pay only cursory attention to teaching foundational learning skills, such as reading and writing (McKay et al., 2004). An evaluation of the pilot program recommended that more training days be allocated for teaching literacy-related skills.

McKay and colleagues (2004) also suggested that the Department of Labour make its strategy for ABET more explicit within the context of skills transfer because the targeted 1 million jobless people are to be drawn from among the ranks of the illiterate unemployed. At the time of writing, the Department of Labour is reexamining these suggestions for future implementation and a newly established Ministerial Committee of experts has begun to craft a strategy for implementation in 2007.

The importance of the SETAs in education and training is apparent. Each SETA targets adults with little or no schooling within their respective

⁸⁸Different ministries conduct programs aimed at the poor. For example, the Department of Science and Technology has a program on beekeeping to enable the selling of honey and the Department of Trade and Industries provides seed funding for hawkers and vendors in the informal sector.

sectors. Moreover, given the important role of training attributed to the Department of Labour, it is clear that over the next 5 years, adult education could shift from the Ministry of Education to the Department of Labour if the proposed new literacy campaign is not implemented. Presently it seems as if the education sector has failed to deliver adult education (at a notable scale) subsequent to the creation of our democratic government in 1994. In this regard, the Department of Labour offers hope to employed workers who require literacy, and to adult learners who are not employed and who constitute the poorest segment of the South African population.

Although UNISA ABET continues to train adult educators, tracer studies (Lamont, 2003) indicate that educators are being absorbed into the programs being implemented by the various SETAs and not into programs being implemented by the Department of Education. This suggests that the Ministry of Education does not show as much of a commitment to the subsector of ABE as does the Department of Labour.

Although the SETAs make a valuable contribution to the development of human capacity, it is lamentable that the Department of Education—the custodian of education—has played a relatively small role in the implementation of basic education in the past 10 years of South Africa’s new democracy. Adult education is and should be interministerial but the poor response by the Ministry of Education means by implication that basic education and adult literacy are still the “stepchildren” of the education sector. This neglect underpins the relatively poor investment into adult education and the reluctant delivery across the country.⁸⁹

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⁸⁹After concluding work on this chapter, the author was appointed to the Minister of Education’s Committee on Literacy and basic education, a committee charged with making recommendations to the Cabinet on a proposed new strategy for the mass delivery of ABE that draws on the lessons learned through SANLI.

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